# THE GOLDEN APPLE

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## I

" It seems to me," said Lady Thirsk, known to her intimates as Countess Chris, looking round her with a smile not untouched with mischief, " that Cairo is as good a hot-bed of scandal, malice, and all uncharitableness as the tiniest village or country town at home ! "

This remark, coming from so notable a *mauvaise langue* as pretty Countess Chris, caused a discreet ripple of laughter to pass over the well-filled *salon;* and for a moment no one replied. Then Mrs. de Vigne, a smart little Frenchwoman, much admired in Cairo society, took up the challenge gaily.

"*Ma foi—oui!*" She raised two tiny gloved hands to heaven. " Ze zings I 'ave 'eard—moi ! It is as though all one's 'ouses 'ere were of glass—every one who pass by see all zat goes on—and much zat does not ! "

" Doesn't prevent the dwellers therein throwing plenty of stones," observed one of the men present in the ear of his companion, a handsome, rather stolid-looking woman, whose husband was a well-known Egyptologist. " If Madame's own house *is* of glass, I bet she's responsible for lots of glazier's bills ! What do you say, Mrs. James ? "

But Mrs. James had nothing to say. Her own life was blameless to the point of *ennui*, and she [illegible] no interest in the peccadilloes of her neighbours. Therefore she gave her interlocutor an unmeaning smile, and handed him her cup, to put down somewhere, with an air of relief.

" After all "—Countess Chris took up her parable again—

"I dare say life out here would be quite unendurable without the spice of scandal to lighten it a little. And, by the way, I suppose you have all heard of the latest arrival in our midst?"

Something in her tone betokened an entrancing bit of news, and her friends looked towards her with a brightening of eyes, a metaphorical preening of feathers, which slightly amused the man who had spoken rather cynically of glaziers' bills.

"*Mais non*—we 'ave 'eard nozzing!" Mrs. de Vigne spoke for the assembly. "At least, me, I 'ave 'eard of no new arrival. 'Oo is it then, dear Countess Chris? A notability, a prince, a famous potentate?"

"Oh, dear no!" Countess Chris yawned slightly. "It is not a man at all—only a mere woman!"

There was a slight expression as of disappointment visible on some faces at the words; but those who knew their hostess better, merely smiled and waited for more.

"The latest arrival is the famous Lady Lucia Holland." The speaker paused impressively. "She arrived, unheralded, last night, and has taken up her abode, for the moment, in a suite in the Savoy Hotel."

"Lady Lucia Holland! My!" The exclamation came from a pretty young American girl sitting in a corner with an equally youthful male companion. "Isn't she the lady who was divorced a year or two ago—the beauty, I mean, who was painted and photographed more times than any woman in England?"

"Yes. That is the woman." Even Countess Chris might reasonably be satisfied with the interest excited by her announcement. "It was altogether a very remarkable affair. You remember"—she addressed the world at large—"Lucia Norbury, as she then was, married Sir Gordon Holland some years ago, much to the annoyance of all the match-making mothers who had been angling for him for many seasons."

"Was he so eligible, Chris?" Her cousin, Mrs. Harry Graham, voiced the question.

"My dear, he was simply rolling!" Lady Thirsk raised hands and eyes in unison. "Certainly he was abnormally ugly, more like a monkey than a man, but I believe he was quite a kindly person at heart. Anyway, he simply adored

Lucia, and she did exactly as she liked from the day of her marriage."

"She certainly went the pace," remarked the cynic quietly. "Why old Holland didn't find her out years ago is a mystery. There was that affair with Prince Livenstock—you remember, Countess, don't you? We were all in Rome that winter, and I really thought——"

"Oh, there were heaps of scandals!" returned the hostess airily. "Though I dare say lots of them weren't true. Anyhow, two years ago Holland appeared to wake up to the fact that Lucia was really going too far, and he instituted divorce proceedings."

"Against——"

"Well, that was the extraordinary thing!" Countess Chris leaned back in her chair and crossed her exquisite feet. "Every one knew that at the time Lucia was in the throes of an affair with an African millionaire—you remember the man, diamonds or something?—and naturally we all expected he would figure largely in the Court. But, to our surprise, he was never mentioned, and the man who was eventually made the hero of the case was a boy called Romney—son of Colonel Romney, the younger branch of the old Gloucestershire family."

"I remember the boy—a very promising youngster." A new speaker entered the arena, a quiet-looking elderly man, whose name was known throughout the diplomatic world. "I've been in India so long that I've lost touch with all these people; but surely there was nothing wrong about young Romney?" He paused. "A straight family, they always were—never a word against 'em, men or women."

"Well, evidently this young Romney was some kind of 'sport,'" said Countess Chris smartly. "Anyhow, the case came on, and though it was defended very ably on behalf of Lady Lucia and Mr. Romney, in the face of the overwhelming evidence there was nothing for it but to give the verdict against them."

"A decree *nisi* was pronounced?"

"Yes. But the sensation of the case came later on! She looked round her with a provocative smile. "As soon as the thing was fairly over, young Romney left England, vowing that it had been a put-up thing against him, that he had never wronged Sir Gordon, who was his god-father, by the way, and that nothing on earth should persuade him to marry the woman who had been divorced for his sake."

"H'm. Rather a young cad, I should say." It was the cynic who spoke. "Having got the lady into the mess, the least he could do was to stick to her. After all, you say that the evidence was overwhelming."

"Evidence can be faked." The diplomatist, Sir Eric Mayne, did not raise his voice, but somehow every one listened to him. "It is within the bounds of possibility that he was perfectly innocent in the affair. He may have been the cat's-paw, the scapegoat—— "

"Anyway, it was pretty cowardly to leave the woman to her fate."

"Cowardly, do you call it?" Sir Eric lifted his eyebrows. "It seems to me that it must have required considerable courage to refuse to act as the world expected him to do. And it also seems to me that the only moral prop which could sustain that courage would be the conviction of his own innocence of wrong."

"But, wait a moment, Sir Eric!" Mrs. Graham arrested him with an outflung hand. "What I want to know is this. Was Lady Lucia willing to marry him? Perhaps, you know, it was a case of—what do you call it?—collusion between the two. Possibly the lady merely wished to be free, and got this young man to help her to gain her freedom."

"Not a bit of it!" Countess Chris interrupted vivaciously. "Lucia was madly in love with the young man—he was quite a couple of years younger than she—and it was a fearful blow to her when she discovered he did not mean to marry her, in spite of the verdict."

"What happened then, when the decree had been made absolute?"

"Oh, there was still another unexpected sensation!" The hostess was thoroughly enjoying herself. "A month before the six months was up, Sir Gordon shot himself, and, as the decree had not been made absolute, why, Lucia wasn't really divorced after all!"

"*Ma foi,* what a tangle!" The Frenchwoman was openly intrigued. "Then the lady—she is *une veuve*—a simple widow, is it not so?"

"A widow, yes." Countess Chris laughed. "Simple—well, that is a question of opinion. But she is certainly a rich widow, for it appeared that Sir Gordon had never altered his will."

"Short-sighted, eh?" The interruption came from the cynic.

"Yes. But *on dit* that he never recovered from the shock of finding his wife really guilty. It seems that after starting proceedings he repented, and tried to squash—quash—what's the word, Sir Eric?—anyway, he tried to stop them. But Lucia insisted that the thing should go on, and that is what somehow makes one wonder——"

She paused.

"Well? Wonder what? Dear Chris, don't keep us in suspense!"

"Whether, after all, it was simply a ruse to get young Romney to marry her."

"But surely"—it was Sir Eric who spoke—"this young Romney would be no sort of match for Lady Lucia Holland? The family aren't rich, for all their good blood."

"No, but he's very good-looking, attractive—well-built and all that, and you know what a capricious woman is like!" She shrugged her shoulders. "Perhaps she really wanted him."

"What did the fellow's people say about it all, Countess? Surely they wouldn't approve his unwillingness to carry out his obligations, eh?"

"Of course not, Mr. Lucas. How could they? His father, they say, turned him out of the house, saying he couldn't help having a libertine son, but he wasn't going to countenance a blackguard!"

"A fine distinction," murmured Sir Eric Mayne thoughtfully.

"He gave his son to understand that he would not get a penny more than was absolutely his due. So young Romney simply said good-bye, shook the dust of England off his feet, and departed to seek his fortune in another country."

"I wonder where he is now," said the American girl wistfully. "I guess I'd like to see him—he must be a bit of a change from all you other young men."

"I'd rather see the beauty," observed her companion, with a chuckle. "Lady Thirsk, is there any hope of us ever meeting the lady? You know her, I reckon, but do you intend to extend the privilege to us poor mortals?"

Countess Chris turned to him a radiant, malicious, altogether intriguing countenance; and those who knew her best guessed that she was about to make an announcement whose making gave her a tremendous satisfaction. But even those who knew her did not guess the nature of the sensation they were about to experience.

" Being an altruist of the highest order," she purred softly, " I intend to extend a double privilege to all you poor dears. As soon as I knew Lucia was here, I telephoned to her, asking her to drop in to tea this afternoon. And she replied that she would be here somewhere between five and six."

An immediate surreptitious consultation of watches proclaimed the hour to be five-thirty; and one or two of the visitors who had begun to gather up furs and effects preparatory to departure resumed their former positions of languid elegance as though time were no longer of any account.

Only Sir Eric Mayne rose decisively.

" I'm afraid my meeting with the lady will have to be deferred, Countess." He spoke pleasantly. " Duty calls, or I would willingly remain to make acquaintance with the ill-treated beauty."

" Oh, but you simply mustn't go ! " Countess Chris rose impetuously, moved thereto by the exigency of the situation. " You haven't heard the rest of my surprise ! You see, I happen to know young Romney a little—I used to visit his people in Gloucestershire—and so, when I met him in Cook's this morning—— "

" What, he's here too? But what is he doing here? " She had succeeded in awakening interest in her hearer's breast, for all his haste to depart.

" Oh, business—of sorts," returned the Countess vaguely. " Anyway, he's here, and as I knew he would like to know a few of *us* "—she waved her hand comprehensively round the room—" I asked him to drop in quietly about half-past five."

" Countess Chris, you're a wicked young woman ! " Although he spoke lightly, Sir Eric Mayne was secretly much annoyed by this manifestation of the lady's monkey-like propensity for mischief. " You arranged this meeting solely for the purpose of making one—or both—of these people furious, or uncomfortable. Now, own up that it was sheer malice made you invite Romney here to-day. Otherwise, you know, we should put it down to tactlessness, and for a perfect hostess like Countess Chris to forget her tact——"

He had suceeded in penetrating her armour, and she flushed angrily.

"Tact! I've loads of it—no one has as much as I have!" She was genuinely enraged at this aspersion on her social character. "Why, ask Thirsk who's pulled him through all the awkward moments of his life . . . he'd always have been in hot water but for me! In India alone he'd have been sent home heaps of times if I'd not been there to smooth over his blunders, poor dear! And to speak to *me* of tactlessness——"

"In that case it is pure wanton mischief that has driven you to this act," he said, in a low voice. "And I, for one, don't intend to stand by and watch the result of your maliciousness. So I'll say au revoir, Countess. We shall meet at the Savoy to-night, I suppose."

He held out his hand as he spoke, but the Countess' bright eyes were gazing past him with an expression he could not at first interpret; and he turned, involuntarily, to see on what, or whom, they were fixed.

At the same moment he became aware of a sudden hush in the big room. It was as though all these chatterers had been stilled into silence by some unseen agency; and as he looked towards the door, Sir Eric knew to what cause to attribute this almost eerie hush.

For a woman was entering the room, ushered in by the grave Greek butler; and as he saw her, even the diplomatist caught his breath at the sight.

Perfect beauty is always a thing to inspire awe as well as joy in the heart of a sensitive beholder; and, although Sir Eric had a very strongly preconceived idea of the wife who had betrayed her husband for the sake of a man who had not, or so it seemed, been a willing party to that betrayal, he could not deny that Lucia Holland was a very beautiful woman.

Fairly tall, wrapped in sumptuous furs which hid, for the moment, the perfection of her figure, the famous beauty entered the room slowly, her sapphire-blue eyes roaming languidly over the assembled visitors in search of her hostess.

Her clearly cut face was delicately tinted, whether by nature or art Sir Eric could not decide; but since she was certainly not over thirty, it was quite possible her smooth, fair skin was untouched by cosmetics. Her mouth was at once her most beautiful and most provocative feature. In shape an almost perfect bow, of a deliciously rosy hue, there was a hint of something enigmatic about the corners of the lovely lips which not one man in a hundred could view quite unchallenged. The rest of the face, for all its perfections, the marvellous eyes with their curling lashes, the finely-pencilled eyebrows, the broad, low brow, was merely the apotheosis of any ordinary beauty; but the mouth, with its sphinx-like hint of mystery, its extraordinary allure, its promise of further beauties when the finely curved lips should part in speech of smile, made the face that of an enchantress; and Sir Eric Mayne was forced to admit that for once rumour had not lied in dubbing this woman beautiful.

" 'Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?' " he murmured under his breath, as the newcomer advanced with her peculiarly arresting walk. "If young Romney could deny himself the possession of *this* loveliness——"

A moment later he heard her speak; and her voice, with its note of artificiality, disappointed him.

"A throat like that should have produced a more musical voice," he said to himself. "But perhaps it is only in the speech of society that this high-pitched note is audible. Possibly when the lady speaks *en intime* one may hear a more charming lilt."

Lady Lucia was acknowledging her friend's greeting with an impassive air which threw Countess Chris' vivacity into high relief. Whatever she might be, she was not effusive; and after a few words she turned aside to greet Mrs. Graham, who, as her hostess's cousin, was presumably already known to her.

It was just as Countess Chris laid her fingers lightly on his arm, evidently with a view to effecting an introduction, that Sir Eric's perception became aware of another of those extraordinary silences which had preceded the entrance of the beauty. Since her arrival, the spate of chatter had broken out again, the guests warmed into even more than their usual animation as a cloak to their deep interest in the newcomer; but as he turned towards Lady Lucia in obedience to his hostess' light but compelling touch on his arm, a stillness fell; and Sir Eric told himself that the second sensation of the afternoon was at hand.

"Lady Lucia, let me present Sir Eric Mayne." Countess Chris smiled airily. "Sir Eric, you'll get Lady Lucia some coffee, won't you? And find her a comfy seat. I must just——"

She broke off abruptly, and for a moment Sir Eric fancied he saw a shade of discomfiture flit across her face as though for once she were disconcerted by the success of her own malicious plan. But if that were so, she pulled herself together heroically, and turned to greet her latest visitor as though awkwardness were unknown to her.

"Mr. Romney! How good of you to drop in!" Her voice was as carelessly light as ever. "I was half afraid you had forgotten the address—though, after all, we are as well known in Cairo as the Citadel!"

Turning, with an instinctive curiosity which he could not quell, Sir Eric saw the young man come to a halt over his hostess' outstretched hand. He had suddenly caught a glimpse of the face of the visitor who had preceded him, and that he, at least, had been in ignorance of Lady Lucia Holland's arrival in Cairo no one watching him could have doubted.

It was as though an electric finger had been laid upon him, galvanising him into a fuller, more vivid life. There was an instantaneous stiffening of his figure, a rapid lift of the head which betokened an acute bracing of mind and body alike, and into the blue eyes—as blue as Lady Lucia's own—there leaped a look, a hardness of resolution, which turned them into the shining blue of steel.

Lady Lucia also had turned, as though wondering at Sir Eric's sudden silence, and for a moment the beautiful room was very still, as these two, who had been branded as lovers before the eyes of a censorious yet secretly admiring world, stood once more face to face.

As always, the woman was the more composed. Although the meeting was as unexpected to her as to him, her manner showed no discomfiture, no loss of self-control, no trace of nervousness.

Instead, she let her wonderful eyes stray slowly over his face, with a half-absent, half-amused smile at the corner of her perfect lips, and an admirably simulated unconsciousness of any recognition, which seemed to say that for her this person was non-existent.

In a word, it was a "cut" of the most superior, most refined order—an absence of recognition which was a thousand time more effective than any shoulder-turning, any marked drawing back would have been; and it was calculated to make the recipient thereof feel—and look—less a criminal than a fool, a something so far removed from the sphere of the observer's existence as to be practically *nil.*

The next moment Lady Lucia turned back to Sir Eric and said, in that metallic voice of hers which yet sounded oddly artificial, as though she could speak more beautifully if she would:

"Can you find me a seat, Sir Eric, do you think? No, no coffee, thanks. But I must just sit in a corner for five minutes while you tell me who all these people are!"

And as he piloted her to a seat, Sir Eric said to himself, with a vehemence which would certainly have astonished his companion had she been privileged to hear the words:

"Confound these women and their cruelties! First Chris, now this beauty! And whatever he did—if he did anything at all, which I'm beginning to doubt—I'm sorry for that boy!"

Which seems to show that there was one man, at least, in Cairo who did not fall instantly beneath the spell of the beautiful—and notorious—widow of the late Sir Gordon Holland.

## II

Night, the perfumed, starry night of Egypt, had fallen over the desert.

In Cairo the lights still gleamed brightly, *arabeahs* and motors still dashed hither and thither in the streets, for it was Saturday night, and the dance at the Savoy was in full swing. The cafés too were crowded, for the night was fine and warm, and there was as yet little cessation of the noise which is an inseparable feature from the life of the gay city of the Nile.

Over the Bridge it was quieter, less crowded. On the Island of Ghezireh the night seemed warmer, the stars brighter, the breeze from the Nile more balmy. Although it was only January, there was no chill in the air, rather a benignant warmth which seemed to hold a promise of summer; and from the gardens surrounding the charming villas, where so many of the European residents of Cairo prefer to live, there arose strange, sweet scents which spoke eloquently of the care of the Arab gardeners, who had surely watered their flowers copiously at sunset.

Overhead the big bright stars hung, sparkling, in the deep blue canopy of the sky; and among them a thin crescent moon trembled, a delicate silver sickle as yet untouched by any hint of maturity.

It was a night made, one would have said, for serenity, for a quiet consciousness that all must be well in a world so gloriously calm, so brilliantly serene. Out here, in this suburb of noisy Cairo, all was peace, gentle, starlit peace. From the villas in their clustering gardens there floated, now and then, the music of voices, of laughter softened by distance into a delicate fantasy of sound; and although the tiny moon gave no light, the shimmer of the stars more than atoned for its absence.

Yet to Victor Romney, walking alone beneath the spangled sky, the night brought little calm. Try as he might, he could not, yet, rise superior to the remembrance of Lady Lucia's cleverly expressed disdain when chance—for so he dubbed it—had brought them face to face before a roomful of inquisitive, chattering, peeping strangers.

Although the situation had been saved through his hostess' ready tact—for Sir Eric's arrow had gone home—he could not forget that horrible moment when the woman who had wrecked his life looked at him as though he were not there before her; and the moment was horrible to him, not because he wished for recognition—Allah forbid!—but because he read in her attitude, or thought he did, the passionate, vindictive hatred which had taken the place of that equally passionate love which he had been forced to repulse.

For a man to deny a beautiful woman's offered love is sufficiently unusual to be remarkable; since convention wills that the offering may come only from a man. And to Victor there was something peculiarly repugnant about the whole affair, remembering, as he did, that from the very first he had shown her plainly that he looked upon their flirtation—the flirtation she had inaugurated—as a game to be played within strictly limited bounds.

He had thought she understood, and accepted, his unspoken conditions; and when, suddenly, she had turned upon him and demanded that he should make good his jesting protestations, no man in the world could have been more astonished than he.

At first he had not believed her, had deemed her in play when she told him, looking her loveliest, that she was his for the taking; and had tried to laugh off the subject, while inwardly resolving to be a little more discreet for the future.

But when he found that she meant what she said, discovered that what had been a summer day's frolic was likely to turn to deadliest earnest, Romney spoke plainly to the woman who would thus mould his life to her desire; and it was only then that he discovered her intention to allow her husband—would not *persuade* have been the truer word?—to divorce her for his sake. . . .

To the very end he never really understood what was happening. The Divorce Court proceedings were like a bad dream, a vile, chaotic nightmare, a nightmare of perjury, of false evidence against which his word, given in private to the woman's husband, with every asseveration of innocence which his tongue could utter, in public in answer to the probing questions of Sir Gordon's legal advisers went for nothing; and when in the end he found himself adjudged to have betrayed the old man who had been good to him, it seemed at first that there was nothing for it but to choose one of two courses—either to surrender to the woman who had entrapped him, or to blow out his brains and be done with it. But saner counsels prevailed. He was young, in love with life; and since his conscience was clear of anything but the merest folly—and what young man in his place could have refused the harmless favours of a noted beauty?

—he had determined to leave England for a time, first making it clear to the woman who had thus cast aspersions on his honour that he did not intend to give her that which she had so ruthlessly planned to take.

Of that last interview between them he never liked to think, even now when nearly two years had gone by. But he had stood firm, although his own father had turned against him, and had left England, knowing himself *tabu* to many of his former friends, since it was impossible to explain the facts of the case in words.

He had drifted, finally, to Cairo, on the invitation of a friend, who was about to establish a business there, and would welcome his aid; but it is safe to say that had he known of Lady Lucia Holland's imminent arrival, he would have left Egypt by the first available boat.

Suddenly, as he strolled, Victor awoke to the fact that it was growing late; and he turned to walk back into Cairo with a resolve to put the meeting of the afternoon out of his mind altogether, since it was improbable that he would again come across the woman of whom he was obliged to think as an enemy.

With this wise resolution to fortify him, he began to enjoy his walk; and when he reached the centre of the bridge he paused to look about him. He had not been in Cairo long enough to grow indifferent to the magic of the Nile; and to-night, in the brilliant starlight, the river was indeed a place of enchantment as it flowed along, quietly, as though in a dream, between its banks, interspersed, oddly, with houses and palm-trees.

Cairo, in the starlight, looked scarcely less enchanted, the soft light hiding all modern ugliness with a kindly veil. Even the barracks took on a softened outline in the fairy radiance; and the Boulac quarter, with its quaint native buildings, might have been some village in an Eastern tale. Here, alone in the night, one could forget modern Cairo's likeness to any Continental city, forget its shops, its trams, its hordes of tourists, and think of it as the old walled city known long ago as El-Fostat, with its gates, the Bab-el-Nasr and the rest.

From here it looked indeed a magic city, a place where romance still lived, where adventure still lurked in narrow streets, in queer, overhanging houses, behind latticed windows, within walled-in courtyards where fountains played, and there was ever a twittering as of many birds: where bright eyes peeped through slits in the high walls. . . .

Ah! With a sudden start he came to himself, and aware that time was passing while he stood dreaming here, he moved briskly on again, his steps ringing firmly on the pavement in the stillness of the night.

Although it was not much past ten o'clock, there was an air of space, of emptiness about the streets which was never visible in the day-time. Presently the town would be full again, when the theatres closed, and many of the patrons of the cafés went homewards; but for the moment he had the roadway more or less to himself, save for a few Arab passers-by.

He walked along rather abstractedly, taking little heed of his direction, though he guessed, vaguely, that he was on the right path; when suddenly he heard something, a sound which awoke him completely from his dreaming mood. And the sound was one which no Englishman could hear at night in an Eastern city without a quickening of his pulses, and a corresponding quickening of his steps.

It was a cry in a girl's voice, a cry for help; and without a second's delay Romney set off running in the direction whence the piteous cry had come; which proved to be a narrow street off the main thoroughfare down which he had been sauntering.

Without hesitation he tore down the street, and was in time to see three natives, alarmed probably by the sound of his footsteps, making off at the double, while the victim of their persecution, a girl wrapped from head to foot in a black cloak, stood with her back to the wall of an adjacent house, panting for breath and shaking from head to foot.

A moment later Victor was beside her, but at first she was too terrified to distinguish between him and her persecutors; and she only shrank farther back, trying in vain to pull the black covering over her head completely to conceal her face.

But Romney was in no mood to stand on ceremony; and he put his hand on her arm with a firm, though kindly, grasp.

"See here," he said decisively, "what's the matter?

Did those blackguards frighten you? You're quite safe now, you know. You needn't be afraid of me—I only want to help you."

For a moment she quivered in his grasp. Then with a resolute movement she shook off his hand and faced him.

"You're English—oh, I'm so glad you came! I was so frightened of those Arabs—they tried to rob me, and—I called twice, but no one came."

"Well, they're gone now," said Romney reassuringly. "But you know I don't think you ought to be out alone at this hour of night. What on earth are your people thinking of to let you wander about like this!"

Between the black folds which still half hid her face he saw a flood of crimson rise; and guessed that she was out without the knowledge and consent of her lawful guardians. This certainly gave a tinge of austerity to his voice as he said, without waiting for an answer to his question:

"Where do you live? I'll see you home, of course, but I really think you ought to know better than to go about Cairo by yourself late at night."

For a second she did not reply. Then she said, half-defiantly—a defiance belied by the faint quiver in her voice:

"I don't come out at night as a rule, but I had to, to-night, to post a letter. And I should have been quite safe if these men hadn't frightened me by following me, and made me lose my way."

"A letter, eh? Well, have you posted it?"

A vigorous shake of the head was her only reply.

"Well, if you like to trust your letter to me, I'll post it as I go. But you really must go home at once. Where do you live?"

At this reiteration of his question she gave in suddenly.

"I live in the Sharia Suliman Pasha—not far from here, really." She spoke rather pleadingly. "It wouldn't have taken me long to go to the post office, but if you—if you are going that way——"

"*You* aren't going to any post office," he said decidedly. "I'm going to take you home at once. I know the street—near the Kasr-el-Nil, isn't it? And I'll promise to post your letter on the way home."

She hesitated, and he deduced from the hesitation that she hardly liked to entrust her letter to a stranger. Mingled with the conviction came a queer little wonder as to what the letter could contain, since it was obviously to be posted with the utmost secrecy; and following on the heels of this came another wonder—what age was the letter-writer, and to what section of society did she belong?

Her voice was that of an educated girl of his own class, but, if it did not belie her, the fact gave to this escapade an unpleasant tinge of the clandestine; since properly brought-up girls do not wander about Oriental cities at night in order to post letters which might, one would think, be posted safely and reasonably by daylight.

Even as the thought flitted through his brain the girl at his side made up her mind, apparently, to trust him.

"If you will be so good as to post my letter," she said, in quite a stately fashion, "I shall be very much obliged to you."

She held out a small white envelope as she spoke, and the movement made her covering garment fall back from her head and shoulders, thereby revealing her for a moment to her by now frankly intrigued companion.

She clutched its folds again with a nervous hand, but this time, apparently considering it unnecessary to hide herself further, she merely held it round her without attempting to cover her head.

Thus unprotected, she appeared to Romney to be a very young girl, with a fair, rather flushed face, in which two brown eyes shone like misty stars, pale-gold hair parted in the middle and waving over her ears, and a pretty, child-like mouth which at the moment quivered as though its owner were sensitively afraid of disapproval, or, perhaps, ridicule.

Her age Romney guessed to be little more than seventeen at the most, and the fact softened his manner when he spoke, for he himself owned a young sister, and he fancied for a moment that Griselda looked at him through this girl's big eyes with a wistful appeal for kindness rather than censure.

"I'll post your letter the moment I've seen you safely indoors." For the first time he smiled. "I promise I won't forget it. Now, is one of these your house?" She had led him across the street, and now came to a stop outside a tall building which he guessed to be let out in flats.

"Yes. We—my uncle has a flat here. It's called Tewfik House, you see, and we are Numero dix." The flats were numbered in French. "I've got a key, so I'm quite all right, really."

"Just let me see you past the *concierge*, or his Arab equivalent," he said, passing up the steps as he spoke and noting the Arab slumbering serenely in his little sentry-box in the hall. "You're sure you can get in? Got the key? That's right. Then I'll say good-night. But"—he detained her for a moment—"you really mustn't wander about like this, you know. It isn't safe."

"I won't do it again—I promise," she said, with a sudden rather weary submission. "Thank you very much for seeing me home—and for frightening away those horrid Arabs. And—good-night."

She held out her hand as she spoke, and he shook it kindly.

"Now, run along upstairs—what's your number—ten? Right. Good-bye. I'm off to the post office now with your letter."

A second later she had vanished up the stone steps, and he retraced his steps thoughtfully into the street.

"Now I wonder what lies behind all this," he said to himself as he walked. "I must post the letter, of course. I suspect the girl is a minx, for all her youthful airs, and has a love-affair that her parents don't approve of! She looked very young, of course, not much more than a school-girl, and, as far as I could judge, she was distinctly pretty. Well, she's had the fright of her life to-night, minx or no, and let's hope it will be a lesson to her, little idiot!"

Thus apostrophising her, he hurried briskly along in search of a post office; and, passing one presently, he drew the letter out of his pocket and glanced, half-unconsciously, at the direction on the envelope.

He had no ulterior motive in so doing, since this girl's correspondence was certainly of no interest whatever to him; and, in view of later happenings, it may be conjectured that it was destiny which directed his eyes to the address, written in a firm, girlish handwriting on the small white envelope.

The letter was addressed to a certain Count Paolo Rossi, who lived, apparently, in the Shubra quarter; and Romney involuntarily whistled to himself as he read the words.

"Rossi, eh! A foreigner—and a count into the bargain. I hope that nice little girl isn't mixed up with some rascally adventurer! Italian, of course. Well, I must remember the name. Perhaps Max knows something of him--and, in any case, it is nothing to me, so here goes!"

He slipped the letter into the opening, and listened to the tiny thud which it made as it fell with a sense of uneasiness for which he could not account. For a moment he felt as though he would give much to recall the envelope; and then he shrugged his shoulders half-angrily, and told himself he was a fool to interest himself in things which did not concern him in the least.

As he turned away he noticed a tiny square of white pasteboard lying on the pavement at his feet, and realised that in pulling the girl's letter out of his pocket he had dropped a card given him earlier in the day by Sir Eric Mayne, coupled with a kindly invitation to him to call whenever he found himself at leisure for a chat.

He had been pleased by the invitation, coming as it did immediately after Lady Lucia's open slight, and had put the card into his pocket with a resolve to take the diplomatist at his word.

He had not really noticed where his new acquaintance lived, and he stooped and picked up the card with a faint curiosity to know in what part of the city Sir Eric had his habitation.

He looked, half-idly, at the address printed neatly thereon; but suddenly indifference gave place to a very real and lively interest, and he pursed his lips into a whistle as he realised a fact which at this moment seemed to him to bear a most curious and unexpected significance.

The flat to which he had just conducted his unknown acquaintance was that occupied by his new friend, Sir Eric Mayne.

## III

"I SAY, Max, you knock up against heaps of people, don't you, every day? Well, do you happen to have come across a fellow called Rossi? An Italian, I believe, and a count of sorts into the bargain."

It was eleven o'clock on the Monday morning following Victor's rescue of the young English girl, and he and his friend Max Wynne were sitting in the large, lofty showroom where wonderful rugs and carpets, Persian, Turkish, Armenian, were displayed to the best advantage by the senior member of the firm.

For this was the nature of the business which had brought Victor Romney to Cairo; and since, in spite of honest endeavours to see his father's point of view, he could not but feel sore and wounded that Colonel Romney had made so little effort to understand *his* side of the question, where the proceedings of the Divorce Court were concerned, Victor took a wholly unregenerate pleasure in the fact that to his father this carpet-shop, for such it was, would be absolute *anathema*.

True, the rugs and carpets they sold were in many cases unique. And the majority of their customers were collectors, wealthy men from both sides the Atlantic, who recognised the beauties of the wares shown them, and willingly paid high prices for the treasures they desired.

Victor, in truth, knew as yet little enough of carpets and rugs. But Maxwell Wynne, by virtue of a Persian stepmother, and a frequently visited home in Bagdad, knew a good deal, and was often able to procure, for some favoured client, a bargain which even the *pukka* merchants of Cairo could not beat.

Wynne's own mother had died when he was a mere child, and his father, travelling in search of distraction, had encountered, while in Teheran, the pretty Persian girl whom he afterwards made his wife. He had resolved from the first that his son should receive the usual education of an English gentleman's son, though he himself had made his home in Persia; but he had no objection to the boy visiting him now and again, and when he had done with school and college—the latter submitted to as an irksome necessity—Max had hastened off to Persia and remained there while he learned the rudiments of the carpet industry with a view to turning the knowledge to account presently.

This venture in Cairo was the outcome of an old-established project, and he had opened what he liked to call, quite inaccurately, his "bazar" in October of the year preceding Victor's arrival.

The two had been at school and college together, and had always been friends, Max being a welcome visitor at Romney Court during many holidays and vacations. He had been in Persia at the time of the proceedings which had darkened his friend's life, but he had written to Victor asking him straight out what the truth of the matter really was, since it seemed impossible to him that Victor would act in a manner so contrary to his seldom expressed but strongly held notions of honour. And Victor's reply, short and almost curt as it was, had told him just what he had hoped—and expected—to learn: that, in spite of appearances, his friend had not betrayed his own standards.

The invitation to join him in Cairo had been made months ago, but existing arrangements had prevented Victor's acceptance earlier. Now, however, in the beginning of the year, he had found it possible to accept, and had come to Cairo prepared to do his best to master the details of what promised to be a fascinating business, full of the romance and colour of the East, and quite apart from the commonplace buying and selling which was all that English merchants could compass.

His work at present lay chiefly in the background: in the writing and translating of letters, the supervision of packing and handling of valuable goods, matters connected with insurance and the like. It was Max who did the actual buying, receiving large consignments from a step-uncle in Teheran, and from other relations in various parts of the world, Africa, Spain, Morocco, and handling the goods with a clear appreciation of their values and demerits, and a ready comprehension of the requirements of the connoisseurs who visited the place.

At the moment of Victor's inquiry, Wynne was stooping attentively over what seemed to him to be a flaw in an otherwise perfect carpet from the sacred city of Kairouan, and for several moments he did not reply. Then, looking up rather abstractedly, he said:

"Sorry, old chap. What did you say? Something about an Italian, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I want to find out what I can of a fellow called Rossi—lives somewhere out towards Shubra. Ever heard of him?"

Wynne straightened himself up from his stooping position, thereby revealing himself to be immensely tall, and the possessor of thick, curling black hair which generally stood up in wild disorder over his head. He was a pleasant-looking fellow, with shrewd grey eyes and a florid complexion, and both he and Victor were apostles of the creed of keeping fit.

"Rossi . . . let me think." He lighted an abnormally long and thin Russian cigarette. "I know the name, if I can just hit on the owner. Wait a bit—I have it. Surely you don't mean that chap Rossi who is a scorcher at polo, and a thoroughly bad egg into the bargain?"

"Well, I don't know." Romney was taken aback. "I never heard of him before last night, but if he's a count, and his other name is Paolo, I guess you've hit the bull's-eye first shot."

"Paolo—that's the name." Wynne turned to look at his friend in surprise. "I say, Vic, I don't want to butt in on your concerns, but if I were you I'd give that nobleman the cold shoulder right away."

"I've never set eyes on him," said Victor indifferently, "and I don't suppose I ever shall. But you might just tell me why you think him an undesirable acquaintance."

Wynne left the precious carpet in the lurch, and, coming across to his friend's desk, perched himself on the arm of a chair and swung his long legs thoughtfully.

"Well, to begin with, there were queer rumours about him after the last war—you know, the kick-up in Tripoli?" Thus elegantly does modern youth designate combat in battle. "There were ugly stories about him being over-friendly with the enemy, in spite of his high-sounding Italian name; and, besides that, there are various scandals about his private life. It is said he daren't show his face in Rome, owing to an attempted elopement with a young Italian girl—with strictly *dis*honourable intentions."

He paused.

"So far I haven't heard of him cheating at cards, but I have heard rather queer stories of him repudiating racing bets. In any case, I should say he is a thorough *vaurien*, and I really should give him a wide berth if I were you."

"I see. And what is he like to look at—the typical Italian, eh?"

"Well, dark and slim and well-dressed. Has eyes like sloes, and little white teeth like a girl's. I suppose he would be considered good-looking, in an effeminate kind of way; but personally I dislike that overbred sort of look. He's not as effeminate as he looks, by the way. He's reputed to be the best fencer in Italy, and he's a dead shot."

"Oh, well, he has his good points. You needn't worry about me, old fellow. I haven't the least intention of making the gentleman's acquaintance."

"Glad to hear it." Max returned to the study of the Kairouan carpet, while Victor applied himself to the translation of a letter from Spanish into English—a task which presented much difficulty, since he was by no means a finished Spanish scholar.

Three days later Romney received a note from Sir Eric Mayne asking him to waive ceremony and lunch with him on the following day; and since that day happened to be Friday, when, in accordance with the native custom, the shop was closed, Victor accepted the invitation cheerfully.

He could not help wondering whether he would meet the girl he had rescued from the Arabs; and it was with a distinct sense of anticipation that he set forth to keep the appointment on the beautiful January morning.

It was not until he stood outside the door of Sir Eric's flat awaiting admittance that it occurred to him that if the heroine of the nocturnal adventure did indeed live here, she might feel some awkwardness at this *rencontre*. True, it was only to be expected that she would be prepared for his advent; and, in any case, the meeting was bound to take place sooner or later, so that, after all, it was as well to get it over without delay.

But although he told himself repeatedly that the affair was absolutely nothing to do with him, he had felt sundry passing qualms as he thought over the information he had gleaned about the recipient of her letter—the Count Paolo Rossi, whom this girl evidently admitted to her friendship, since they were on terms which allowed correspondence. It was possible, more, probable, that the girl had no idea of the man's real character; but he could not understand how her parents or guardians could permit the slightest acquaintanceship between a young girl of her age and a notorious scamp such as this Rossi appeared to be.

True, the aforesaid guardians might know nothing of the acquaintance; but such a supposition involved a still more unpleasing conjecture, which the glimpse he had caught of the girl's wide brown eyes seemed to discount.

In any case, he could do nothing in the matter; and when the door was opened to him by a smiling native servant in garments of white, girded with red, Victor resolutely put it out of his mind for the time being, and prepared to meet his host with a sensation of vivid pleasure.

"Come in, Romney; I'm glad you were able to accept my invitation at such short notice." Sir Eric welcomed him cordially. "Sit down and have a sherry and bitters—lunch will be ready in a few minutes."

Victor accepted the invitation, looking round the room—a charming, cream-walled, book-lined place—with frank interest; and Sir Eric smiled as he watched the survey.

"This is my own private sanctum," he said. "The rest of the flat is given over to my niece, who keeps house for me; and her fancy runs to rather strange effects at times!"

"Well, women do have queer tastes, don't they?" He smiled. "I know my young sister turned the whole house upside-down when she left school two years ago——"

He broke off, remembering what else had happened two years ago; but Sir Eric took him up smoothly.

"Is your sister really of an age to leave school for good! How time flies! You know—or probably you don't—I was at your father's wedding, twenty-eight years ago it must have been; and although we have met rarely since then, I have always been interested to hear news of him through mutual friends."

"I didn't know you knew my father." Romney's face had grown a little pale. "Perhaps, seeing the light in which he regards me now, I ought not to have taken advantage of your hospitality, Sir Eric, without explaining that I am a sort of prodigal son in his eyes, only fit to eat husks and live among swine!"

He knew even as he spoke that he was acting foolishly; that his host might resent this *gaucherie*, this most undiplomatic dragging in of a debatable subject; but something drove him on, even although he felt that he was committing an error of taste, at least—some ineradicable bitterness which was fast eating its way into his naturally generous and unsuspicious nature.

But Sir Eric's face did not lose its look of welcome, and when he spoke his voice was still kind and friendly.

"Since you have brought up the subject yourself, my boy," he said, "I gather you will have no objection to my passing an opinion on it. And my opinion is simply this. Only a man who was very conscious either of his own integrity or of the woman's innate unworthiness could have acted as you did in refusing to accept what to the onlooker seemed your due—in the hateful jargon of the world. And since we can none of us blazon forth the unworthiness of a woman to that same censorious world, I can only admire the courage which, at the risk of being dubbed cowardice and other harder names, refused to turn folly, gross, culpable folly, I admit, into downright dishonour."

He paused a moment.

"Naturally one can't expect the world to applaud so great a departure from its usual procedure. But you must remember that folly is often as heavily punished as guilt; and, after all, you know"—he spoke rather gravely now—"you *did* play the fool, didn't you? A young man has no right to play about with a married woman, even if his intentions are strictly honourable, and she is as beautiful as Helen of Troy herself. And if you get a few hard knocks here and there, from the people who persist in looking on you as a blackguard and the lady as an injured saint, well, can you truthfully say that you don't deserve it?"

He laughed as he finished speaking, and held out his hand.

"There, my lecture's finished, and I hope we may be friends. Now, come along into the dining-room. I'm sure lunch is ready, and I expect Valerie is beginning on the salted almonds already!"

"Valerie?" He repeated the name questioningly—he could not help it.

"Yes, my niece, who is making her home with me. Here she is—Valerie, here is our guest, Mr. Romney, Miss Valerie Rivers. Now, sit down, Romney, and let us see what Valerie and Mustafa between them have concocted for our delectation."

Under cover of his words Romney advanced to meet the girl, who had come forward as they entered the large, sunny room. And in the slight, fair-haired figure, whose brown eyes tried, bravely, to meet his openly, although her cheeks were scarlet as the roses on the table beside her, he beheld, as indeed he had expected to behold, the girl whose letter he had posted on that fateful, starlit night nearly a week ago.

It was not until he was seated opposite to her at the round table that Victor ventured to look more closely at Miss Rivers; and when he did so, his previous estimate of her extreme youth was confirmed.

In a white silk blouse with low collar, and a short skirt, she looked little more than a school-girl, though her pale-gold hair, which he had half expected to find hanging in a plait down her back, was dressed with a care which seemed to betoken the hand of a maid. Her large eyes, set wide apart beneath level brows, were surely the candid eyes of a child; and on lips and cheeks there was the dewy freshness which youth alone can bestow.

Looking at her, it seemed impossible to picture her as carrying on a clandestine flirtation with a disreputable Italian count. She looked a great deal more fitted for a strenuous game of tennis, a gallop on horseback, the easy *camaraderie* of the sports club, the hockey field, than an underhand love-affair; and as he looked at her he told himself that after all the letter he had posted must have borne a quite innocuous significance, seeing who was, presumably, the writer thereof.

He guessed that she had recognised him; but although her colour deepened, she gave no sign of having seen him before, and he followed her lead as in honour bound.

She did not take much part in the conversation at first, and he detected a real nervousness beneath her pretty attempts at hospitality. It was evident that Sir Eric was devoted to her; and as the meal progressed she took heart of grace and began to talk more naturally.

In answer to a question she told him she had come out to Cairo the previous autumn, having left school at the end of the Midsummer Term.

" She was really too young to leave, only just seventeen," said Sir Eric, in an explanatory tone. " But Val and I are alone in the world, and when I found myself in Cairo, I really felt I wanted her here. A man must have some sort of hostess to help entertain his friends, even a young one, eh, Val? "

" Well, I've been at school ever since I was seven—holidays and all! " She had a charming voice, and when she smiled she showed the whitest of teeth. " I think I deserve a little fun now! Don't you, Mr. Romney? " For the first time she addressed him directly.

" I do, indeed. And do you find lots of fun in Cairo, Miss Rivers? "

" Well, it's pretty gay," she said. " There are heaps of dances and things of that sort; and though Uncle Eric thinks I'm too young to go to the biggest affairs, he lets me go to all the rest."

" Val is a champion tennis player," said her uncle proudly. " You must get her to show you round the Club at Ghezireh, and perhaps we can have a round of golf sometimes."

" Thanks awfully! I'm afraid I shan't have a great deal of time, though." He smiled rather ruefully. " You see, my friend Wynne is tremendously keen on building up a good business, and I must do my best for him, since he made the opening for me."

" Of course." His host nodded. " I should like to know your friend. From all I hear he has a *flair* for bargains; and I'd be glad to have a look at his carpets one of these days. You must bring him here—I've got a few rather nice rugs myself which he might like to see."

As they were drinking their coffee in the drawing-room preparatory to Victor's departure, the telephone bell rang loudly, and Valerie sprang to her feet.

" Will you excuse me a moment, Mr. Romney? Our

Arabs say the telephone is a device of the Evil One's, and they flatly refuse to have anything to do with it!"

She laughed as she spoke, and whirled out of the room, leaving the two men looking after her—Sir Eric with an expression of half-anxious affection, Romney wondering for the twentieth time if this light-hearted, easy-mannered girl could indeed be the distraught and dishevelled creature of a few nights ago.

"She's a sweet child, bless her!" Sir Eric turned to his guest. "Sometimes I'm half afraid I ought to have kept her at school a year or two longer. She's rather young to be let loose in a gay place like Cairo."

"She is young, yes." He did not know how to proceed.

"I wanted to engage a watch-dog, a chaperone of sorts, not being blessed with any elderly female relatives! But the child dissuaded me. After all, she's been in a convent for ten years—she's not a Roman Catholic—and she said, with a good deal of truth, that she had had enough surveillance to last her the rest of her life, poor child!"

"Well, you can keep an eye on her, I suppose, Sir Eric? It's easier with a girl than a boy, isn't it? I mean you know where she goes, and all that sort of thing."

"Quite so. And I have several good friends in the place. But lately she has been taken up by one or two older women—bridge and so forth; and though I can't say much, I'd sooner see her play a good game of tennis at the Club with young people like herself than sit up half the night over cards."

He turned towards the door as though he heard some one there; but it was a mistake, and after a moment he resumed.

"It's a responsibility, though, and sometimes I think I'll have to get some one to look after her in spite of her protests. She's very good and tractable, of course, but she can't help being rather—well, shall we say attractive? A little time ago some fool introduced an Italian fellow to her—a certain Count Rossi——"

He broke off in surprise. Victor had uttered an ejaculation which seemed to call for comment.

"What—do you know the fellow?" Sir Eric looked astonished.

"No. Only—I seem to have heard the name." He cursed himself for his indiscretion. "I fancy I must have heard Wynne mention it at some time or other."

"Quite possibly." Sir Eric's face looked rather grim. "He is pretty well known, I fancy—and he bears a pretty bad character wherever he goes. Well, he had the impertinence to make violent love to Valerie—to a child like that! Very fortunately I got wind of it through a mutual friend, and I was able to choke the fellow off. Of course I forbade Valerie to see or speak to him again. She was as good as gold over it, and accepted my word for it that he wasn't a desirable acquaintance for her; but you see how many pitfalls a bachelor uncle has to face when he takes a pretty niece into his household!"

Hoping his face betrayed nothing of the tumult in his brain, Romney accepted the cigarette his host offered him as he stopped speaking; and at the same moment Miss Rivers returned, her eyes dancing with pleasure and excitement.

"Well, Val—an important message for me—or an unimportant one for you?"

"It was for me, Uncle, from Mrs. Graham. She and I are playing tennis this afternoon, you know, and she wants me to go to dinner to-night and have some music and bridge. May I go? Do say I may!"

"Bridge, eh? Well, if you'll promise not to play for high stakes—you know I don't approve of you playing for money at all!"

"Oh, I'll be very good!" She advanced into the room with her easy, graceful swing; and looking at her as she came, a symphony of white and gold—white frock, rippling, pale gold hair—Romney dubbed her Atalanta on the spot. "I really must go to-night! For one thing, I've got a new frock—a perfect dream of green and white chiffon, and, for another, there's going to be some one there I want most awfully to meet."

"Well!" Sir Eric shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "Who is it this time—a millionaire or the latest singer from the Opera?"

"Neither!" She laughed, and perched herself on the arm of his chair like a big white bird. "I hate millionaires and I don't know any opera singers. No. This is a woman—a well-known beauty, Lila Graham says—and her name, such a pretty name too, is Lucia—Lady Lucia Holland!"

## IV

As the days passed Romney found himself settling down easily into his new life.

The carpet business proved unexpectedly fascinating, and more and more customers visited the "Bazar," where, thanks to Max' Persian connections, beautiful things could often be picked up.

The two men got on together splendidly, each being responsible for his own department; and for the first time since he had left London branded as the lover of a woman whom he had never, even in his thoughts, dishonoured, Romney began to feel that life was still full to the brim of allurement, of clean, healthy pleasures and anticipations, of unlooked-for enchantments and delights.

He had not yet encountered Lady Lucia Holland for the second time, though his social circle increased so rapidly that the meeting was inevitable, sooner or later. He heard much of her, however, for Lady Lucia was not easily overlooked; and all Cairo was buzzing with tales of her beauty, her fascination, her famous pearls, and her undoubted, if new, discretion.

Discreetly chaperoned by an elderly cousin, she lived luxuriously, but unostentatiously, at the Savoy Hotel; and although her magnificent cream-coloured motor was to be seen flashing hither and thither in the streets, or gliding along the white road which leads to the Pyramids, Lady Lucia was frequently the only occupant, wrapped sometimes in sables on other occasions garbed still more sumptuously in a splendid ermine wrap.

Now and then she entertained a little, still discreetly, for she had many acquaintances in Cairo; and since, after all, she was a representative of a well-known and powerful family, there were always people to be found ready to champion her cause, declaring her to have been the victim of an elderly husband's quite unfounded jealousy. And gradually it came about that even the most exclusive drawing-rooms in the city were thrown open to the beautiful Lady Lucia; until, in a wonderfully short space of time, no smart gathering was considered complete unless marked by the *cachet* of her presence.

Only Sir Eric Mayne refused, as he himself said, to swallow the woman. Possibly because of his friendship with Victor Romney's father, and possibly also influenced by his new-born affection for the boy, he found himself unable to accept Lady Lucia at the general valuation. He thought her a wicked, heartless woman, who would have destroyed a man's life for a selfish whim; and it was with real dismay that he found his young niece Valerie falling under the spell which the beauty knew well enough how to exercise.

It was inevitable that the two should meet, since all Sir Eric's friends took a kindly interest in pretty Valerie; and he could not forbid her to accept one invitation after another because of the probability of Lady Lucia's presence at the function to which she was bidden. How much she knew of the woman's history he was never sure, since it was a subject he could not bring himself to discuss with her; but he tried to comfort himself with the reflection that no one would talk freely to Valerie on the matter; and for the rest he must trust to the girl's innate purity and innocence.

As for Romney, no one, apparently, troubled to remember his position in the affair. Whatever their former relations had been, it was evident that now there was nothing, not the shadowiest ghost of a thing, between them; and since Romney was essentially a sportsman who preferred tennis, polo and racing to afternoon tea and bridge, there was no reason why their orbits should cross save on infrequent occasions.

But Valerie Rivers also loved sport; and she and Romney had many vigorous games of tennis and golf, at both of which she could hold her own, thanks to an excellent physique and a sensible physical training at school. True, she had also what Victor called an abnormal passion for bridge, at which game he learned she excelled; and the only point on which they disagreed was on the wisdom or folly of spending a glorious afternoon indoors over a bridge table instead of taking healthy and stimulating exercise on tennis court or golf-links.

He really could not understand her passion for cards; and to his mind Sir Eric was distinctly culpable in allowing a girl of Valerie's age to mingle so freely with the card-playing set in Cairo. It was all very well for older women to give bridge teas, bridge dinners, to sit up till all hours of the night playing cards; but for Valerie, the very thought was a desecration of her fresh youth.

One thing, however, he discovered, which brought him a little comfort; namely, that Valerie played only for moderate stakes. When, as sometimes happened, stakes grew high, Valerie quietly dropped out of the game; and although he suspected from something she once said, that at first her friends had tried to overrule her decision, he found that now she was left in peace on these occasions. And although here and there, at Lady Thirsk's parties, for instance, high play was the rule, the majority of players themselves possessed only moderate means, and could therefore countenance only moderate stakes.

Even so, Romney thought sometimes that Valerie's allowance from her uncle, on whom she was apparently dependent, must be stretched to its utmost limits; but it seemed she was an oddly lucky player, and rarely lost more than a comparatively small sum.

There was one other point on which Romney felt some curiosity; and that was the exact position which existed between the girl in whom he was beginning to take an extraordinary interest, and the Italian, Count Paolo Rossi, of whom his friend Max had spoken so plainly.

He had met the man by now—had been introduced, and had dined and supped in his company more than once; but he was bound to admit that if the Count verily possessed a cloven hoof he was sufficiently wily to conceal the unpleasant possession, presenting only the appearance of a well-bred, courteous man of the world.

His looks, indeed, were by no means alarming. He was fairly tall, with small bones and a frame suggestive of grace rather than strength—a suggestion belied by the muscles of steel beneath the olive skin. His eyes were black, with the peculiar density of blackness which seems to absorb light without reflecting it again; and the little moustache which hid his mouth, and the hair which grew sleekly on the well-shaped head, were of the same ebony hue. His manner was polished and easy; and although he first met Romney in the character of customer at the carpet shop, there was no hint of surprise or condescension in his greeting of the younger man at a dinner party that same night.

Whatever Count Rossi's record might be, it was evident that here in Cairo he was accepted on the strength of his birth and connections; which were alike unassailable. And although he was probably what Max had termed him, a "bad egg," there was nothing in his present mode of life to call forth condemnation.

He lived alone in a beautiful villa on the Shubra Road, possessed marvellous horses which he entered, now and then, for the races, some of which he himself rode home to victory. He played polo well, tennis brilliantly, and was a daring and skilful motorist; in addition to which accomplishments he was an ardent bridge player, a musician of culture, and was said to possess an acquaintance with the literature of every civilised country in the world.

Therefore he was not only invited to the houses of fashionable Cairo, but welcomed therein; and it was to be noted that for all his undoubted attraction for women, he himself passed unscathed through all the lures temptingly spread before him by such of the women as were dazzled by his personality and forgot to inquire into his financial prospects.

But his position towards women in general did not interest Romney in the least. Only he felt a decided curiosity to know just where Rossi stood in relation to Valerie Rivers; and it was precisely this knowledge which was unattainable.

Remembering the letter he had posted for her, Romney was inclined to believe that there had been something of a flirtation between the two; yet nothing in the girl's manner betrayed any inclination for the man's society. She seemed, indeed, curiously shy of him, as though she would have avoided him, could she have done so without remark; and yet at times there was an odd suggestion of a secret understanding between them which seemed to point to some degree, at least, of intimacy.

Once, at an hotel dance, coming upon the two suddenly in a corner of the palm-filled lounge, he was ready to swear he heard the Italian call her "Carissima," while he held both her hands in his and looked at her with the black eyes which, for all their opaque density, could be very eloquent at times. True, in the momentary glimpse he caught before withdrawing hastily, Victor fancied there was no response, only distress, in the girl's face; but that she did not actively resent the fellow's love-making was evidenced by the fact that she danced with him again, later in the evening.

One rather curious fact he noticed—though in the light of the few words Sir Eric had spoken on the occasion of his first visit to the flat there was really nothing surprising in it. Although Sir Eric did not forbid Valerie to speak to the Italian, he never permitted Rossi to pass his threshold; and in her own home, at least, Valerie was free from pursuit.

Whether she acquiesced in, or resented, the arrangement, Victor had naturally no means of finding out; but he fancied, rather ingenuously, that she was happier, livelier, more at her ease in Sir Eric's flat than anywhere else in the city.

Whether Rossi noticed his growing friendship with Miss Rivers he could not be sure. But he felt now and again as though beneath the Italian's smiling manner there lurked a queer, inexplicable menace, a kind of unspoken threat which could only be safely ignored so long as it remained inarticulate.

And then he told himself that he was absurdly fanciful. Did not Count Rossi greet him again and again in public with a genial *bonhomie* which took no account of the difference in their respective stations? Did he not include Max Wynne in his invitation to dine at the Shubra Villa to inspect his marvellous Bokhara rugs and tapestries? Did he not offer them the loan of his splendid motor-car for a day's run now and again? And did he not send them a highly profitable customer who bought their most expensive carpet, and, better still, praised their wares with the discrimination and knowledge so dear to the hearts of enthusiasts in their chosen profession?

Even Max, hard-headed, shrewd Max, was won, finally, to admit that his previous estimate of their new acquaintance had been too hastily formed; and yet, so strange is the heart of man, Romney would have been almost better pleased had his partner clung to his former summing up of the Italian's character.

So busy, indeed, was Romney's mind with conjectures as to the exact relation between Rossi and Valerie Rivers that he had little time to think of his own affairs, which, with the advent of Lady Lucia Holland, had threatened to become complicated. He was even beginning to hope that she had decided to ignore him, since it was perfectly easy, with a little care, to efface himself from her vision; and although sometimes, in pessimistic mood, he reminded himself of her attitude at their last stormy meeting, he generally managed to reassure himself with the assertion that between Lady Lucia Holland, rich, beautiful and courted, and Victor Romney, an obscure carpet-seller, the gulf was far too wide to permit any bridging of its chasm.

So he lulled his fears to rest, in those first bright days of Egyptian sunshine; and had settled down to enjoy this gay, multi-coloured existence to the full, when something happened which jerked him back with sinister sharpness into the life he had thought was left behind for ever.

## V

On a certain bright morning, when the sun shone royally out of a deep blue sky, and the minarets of the city were bathed in a flood of golden light, a letter arrived for Romney at the carpet shop.

It was brought by a native servant from the Savoy Hotel; and on Romney's return from a visit, on business, to the establishment of Mr. Cohen in the Mousky, he found it lying on his desk in the corner of the shop.

Max was absent at the moment; and for a perceptible space of time Victor stood looking down on the small, square envelope with an expression of the most lively aversion on his face.

It really seemed as though he were making up his mind to ignore it, to leave it unopened; but, if such had been his intention, he mastered it presently, and took up the letter with a visible reluctance.

"What on earth can Lady Lucia have to say to me?" He could conceive no possibility which could justify her action in writing to him. "She must know my only desire is to be left alone, where she is concerned. And in no circumstances will I cônsent to renew the acquaintance which ended for me when the infamous Decree Nisi was pronounced."

By this time he had succeeded in extracting the small, thick sheet from its envelope; and as the latter fluttered to the floor he read the letter through hastily.

"DEAR MR. ROMNEY,

"I wish to see you on a matter of importance. For the sake of appearances I do not ask you to call upon me here; but I am motoring to Mena House this afternoon with Miss Hammond, and will meet you, by chance, on the East side of the Sphinx at five o'clock."

Here the letter ended, and the writer remained his truly, Lucia Holland.

An expression of anger broke from Victor's lips as he read the closing lines; and he crumpled up the paper viciously and flung the resulting ball across the room with such vigour that Max, entering, was brought to a standstill by the onslaught.

"Here—hold on a bit—what are you throwing about like that, Vic? Is it a bill, or a foreign letter you can't translate?"

"Neither." He spoke furiously. "It's a letter from that woman, damn her! How dare she write to me—and in that strain!"

Luckily the two were alone; and Max picked up the crumpled letter and shied it back at his friend before he replied.

"I don't know who the woman may be, or why you should object to her writing to you. But in any case I suppose you don't want the letter to lie about for any chance comer to read?"

"Of course not." Romney's eyes were ablaze, and he smoothed out the ball into the semblance of a letter irritably. "But *you* can read it—and tell me what you think of it. Upon my word, women have the impudence of Shaitan himself!"

Max took the letter from his friend's hand and read it through slowly. As has been said, he was in Romney's confidence concerning the unfortunate affair with Lady Lucia, and although he did not repudiate the letter quite so vehemently as its recipient, he confessed to himself that the writer certainly had what schoolboys call "a nerve."

"Well? You've read it—what do you think of it?" Romney spoke impatiently.

"Think? Why, that the woman has some private reason for wishing to see you. That's obvious. But as to knowing—or even guessing—what that reason may be, well, that's beyond me."

He paused, then added in a different tone:

"You will go, I suppose?"

"Go?" Victor stared. "Why, what do you take me for? *Go?* Run to obey that woman's beck and call like a tame poodle? Of course I shan't. *She* can go, and wait by the Sphinx as long as she likes. I only wish she'd turn into a stone image herself!"

"I daresay you do, but wishing won't work a miracle. Personally, I'd go. Otherwise she will probably think you are funking meeting her."

"So I am," retorted Victor; "and so would you be if you knew her as I do. I tell you she's hatching some diabolical plot to get me into her clutches again; but, thank God, I'm sane now, whatever I may have been; and I don't run my head into a noose twice, let me tell you that!"

"Well, of course you will please yourself," said Max. "As I say, I should go in your place, and let her understand at the same time that you don't intend to renew the acquaintance. You know it's just possible she may wish to apologise, to make things easier for you, and if so——"

"No chance of that." Victor's lips set grimly. "You don't know the lady as I do. But perhaps I'd better go.

God knows what mischief she may be hatching; and possibly I shall avert worse consequences if I go and face her boldly."

"Right. How will you go? Friend Rossi 'phoned up to offer his car to-day, but I declined with thanks, seeing it's band day at the Club."

"So it is—and I'd fixed up a game of tennis with Miss Rivers." He spoke regretfully. "Well, I must send her a line, and I'll go out as soon as business slacks off. But I won't use the Dago's car, I'll go in the humble tram."

"You don't care for Rossi, eh, Vic?"

"No. Do you?"

The *riposte* was so swift that it took Max by surprise, but he answered immediately.

"No. But I think perhaps he's not so black as I painted him. He has decent manners, anyhow, and one or two of the women find him fascinating, it seems."

He turned away as he spoke and bent over a large roll of carpet from Smyrna, as though to express his indifference; but Romney shot a further question at him which did not, perhaps, take him altogether by surprise.

"Does it occur to you that Rossi forces his attentions unduly on Miss Rivers?"

"Miss Rivers? Well, I don't know." He abandoned his pretence of absorption and turned back to face his friend. "Certainly he is apt to hover round her a bit at the Club and at bridge parties; but I hardly know what constitutes the forcing of one's attentions on a lady."

"Oh, you know well enough. But I'll put it another way. Does it strike you that Miss Rivers likes, reciprocates the attentions? To speak still more plainly, do you think there's anything between them?"

If he were surprised, Wynne showed no signs of such emotion.

"I have thought, now and again, that there was," he said slowly. "There's no doubt Rossi admires the girl, and of course she is charming—*and* pretty. But so far as I know she hasn't a penny piece; and I can hardly see our friend harbouring serious intentions where there is no money."

"No. That's what I feel." He paused, his forehead puckered into a frown. "I'd give a good deal to feel certain there was nothing, no understanding of any kind. You know the girl would be a million times too good for that rotter, and in any case Sir Eric wouldn't allow it."

"Well, if that's so, the Dago, as you call him, will be an 'also ran,'" grinned Max cheerfully. "Personally I think any man would be lucky to win the little lady, money or no. But look here, Vic, I don't want to hustle you, but old Benny Doria, or whatever the chap's name is—the fellow who bought my pet Bokhara rug—has sent to know when he may expect to receive it; and if you'll give an eye to the packing I'll be obliged."

"Right." The frown did not completely disappear from Victor's face, but he swung on his heel and departed to the packing room without more ado.

At five o'clock precisely Victor Romney raised his Panama to a lady who was standing abstractedly gazing at the Sphinx, as though even that marvel failed to hold more than a fraction of her attention; and the lady, bringing herself, with an effort, or so it appeared, from her dreams, gave him an absent-minded smile and a languid inclination of the chestnut head in its wonderful ermine cap.

Quite suddenly, or so it seemed, recognition dawned upon her; and her face lighted up with a smile into which, try as he might, Victor read no hint of malice.

"Mr. Romney! So you got my note—and came! How good of you! I was half afraid some engagement might prevent you coming."

"I *had* another engagement," he said stolidly, resolved not to yield an inch of distance beneath her smiles. "But I, too, thought a meeting—one meeting—would be desirable; and I came, as you see."

For a moment her eyes were veiled; but she spoke indifferently.

"Shall we sit down?" She pointed to a little hummock of sand which had probably served some earlier tourist as a seat. "I want to talk to you—to ask you things, to understand, if I can, why you treated me so cruelly, why in return for all my efforts to make you happy you heaped scorn on me, refused to believe in my—friendship for you, and persuaded the world, and yourself, that I was some dreadful Delilah who had set out to ensnare and destroy a Galahad!"

He flushed beneath her words; but before he could speak she went on talking lightly, in one of the few caressing tones of her naturally harsh voice.

"That simile is very mixed, isn't it? Delilah seduced Samson, didn't she? And Galahad belonged to quite another story! But somehow you don't suggest Samson to me"—was there a sneer in the words?—"and Galahad seems to fit you better. Or—do I perhaps mean Lancelot?"

She looked up at him from her seat on the sand hillock; and beneath the white fur of her cap her eyes looked like two blue sapphires set in ivory. But although her voice was soft, the lovely eyes held a mocking sparkle in their depths, and Victor involuntarily braced himself to meet what he instinctively knew was to be a bad quarter of an hour.

"I don't know what you mean," he said rather sternly. "I do not seem to myself to resemble either of your characters. And—are you likening yourself to Delilah—or to Guinevere?"

He had found the chink in her armour, or so it seemed, for she flushed faintly, and her eyes looked angry. But she spoke carelessly enough.

"You think the story of Guinevere—the three characters, the king, the faithless queen, the honourable, chivalrous lover, describes our situation better? Well, perhaps it does. But in the end—I am vague about the story—didn't the queen relinquish her lover and retire to a convent? In that respect, at least, my career does not resemble that of Guinevere!"

It was very still out here in the desert. Luckily the tourists who each afternoon in winter and spring make the hollow of the Sphinx dreadful with their clamour, had vanished, riding away on their camels and donkeys, listening open-mouthed to the wonderful tales told them by their attendant donkey-boys. The Arabs who haunt the Pyramids had withdrawn, deeming business over for the day; and under the lemon-coloured sky only the Sphinx witnessed the meeting between these two who, once adjudged lovers, were now, or so it seemed, enemies.

With all his heart Victor Romney regretted his action in thus entering into fresh relations with this woman who had always, surely, been his secret foe. Whatever the opinion of the world, she at least had known that she was nothing to him; yet for purposes of her own she had led him on, had forced him into the position of her accredited lover; and had calmly demanded from him the "reparation" which she knew in her heart that he did not owe her.

Suddenly Romney felt a vehement, and most unexpected desire to understand her, to know just what her purpose had been in striving to incriminate him in the eyes of the world.

Disregarding her almost flippant remark, he looked down on her coldly.

"Lady Lucia, I would like to ask you a question. Why, out of all the world, did you select me to be your victim in as cruel a conspiracy as was ever planned?"

"Why?" She sprang up suddenly, a splendid figure in her furs, and faced him with something of defiance in her eyes. "You ask me why? You fool, can't you guess why? Because I loved you, because I wanted you for myself, because I would have taught you a thousand things you didn't know, would have opened your eyes to a whole world of which you knew less than nothing! Because my husband was a fool, a dotard—because *my* youth belonged to *your* youth, my beauty to yours, my strength called to yours before which mine was ready to tremble into weakness."

"Oh, hush, hush!" Perhaps it was the very youth of which she spoke that made Romney shrink back, abashed before her avowal; and instantly her tone changed.

"That was why I wanted your love, Victor! And because I couldn't believe you would withstand me if it came to an open scandal, because I believed you would stand by me if my husband set me free, I let him think, let the whole world think, that we were lovers!"

Suddenly her voice melted into a softer note. She laid her hand on his arm, and her blue eyes were the eyes of an enchantress.

"Victor, in spite of your denials, can you look me in the face and say that you never loved me, never longed to make me yours? Look at me. . . . I am not repellent, not one of the women whom no man would want to love? Why, every man you know would envy you if you married me. I don't mean because I'm rich—money means nothing to you, and I'm glad of it—but—am I so horrible to you that you can fling my love back into my face—a second time?"

Slowly he looked at her as she had dared him to do.

Blue eyes met blue eyes; but whereas hers were soft and liquid as forget-me-nots seen through water, his had the hard brightness of steel. For Victor had learned his lesson too thoroughly to err again. The moth's wings had been singed so effectually that he would hover round the candle no more, burn the flame never so brightly.

"You want the truth, Lady Lucia? Then you shall have it. No. I never loved you. The thought of making you mine never entered my head—not because I am the Galahad you mockingly call me, but because I looked on you as the wife—the beautiful and—and kind wife of my friend Sir Gordon. I was a young fool, of course. I don't excuse myself; nor do I deny that I was pleased, flattered, if you like, that a famous beauty was content with my escort here and there. Being a normal man I felt your fascination, but I never dreamed that your fascination was a lure, deliberately put forth to tempt me. I thought you attracted men naturally, because you couldn't help it; and I fell quite openly under your spell. But it never occurred to me that your fascination was a weapon which you meant, later on, and without hint of warning, to hold to my head to force me to surrender!"

His eyes were dark with anger as he finished speaking; and for a moment Lady Lucia said nothing, although her hand fell from his arm and a delicate flush coloured her pale cheeks.

Then she spoke calmly.

"I understand. You intend to maintain your attitude of the virtuous Samson seduced, vainly, by an unsuccessful and unscrupulous Delilah. Very well. Oh, you needn't be afraid I shall bear you malice." She smiled mockingly. "I shall not grind my teeth or vow vengeance on you. I'm not a villainess of melodrama, though really when you glare at me like that I begin to think I am! In future—to borrow a melodramatic tag—we are strangers to one another!"

"I ask nothing better," he said steadily. "If I were to beg a favour of you, it would be simply that. Leave me alone to go my own way; and so you will best repair the injury you did me when you stood up before the world—our world—and lied, wickedly, maliciously, about the relations which existed between you and me."

For a moment a spasm of anger convulsed the beautiful face. Then, with an effort of the will which had rarely hitherto known defeat, she spoke indifferently.

"As you wish," she said, with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "After all, Cairo is full of delightful people. There's no need for either of us to be lonely, is there? And now, my dear Galahad, could you bring yourself to escort me back to Mena House? I'm afraid Miss Hammond will think I have been abducted, carried off by an Arab chieftain!"

She moved away as she spoke, her slim feet in their exquisitely-fitting suède shoes moving lightly over the yielding sand, her ermine coat buttoned closely about her; and as he walked beside her Romney owned to himself that outwardly she was perfect, a vision of loveliness in the desert who could dare even to challenge the Serpent of Old Nile, the beautiful Cleopatra herself. Yet her loveliness moved his heart not a whit.

The sapphire eyes, the shining hair beneath the ermine cap, the seductive mouth, the grace of her movements, of her form, left him cold. Instead he found himself visualising suddenly a girl's slim figure, a girl's fair face with brown eyes beneath a cloud of pale-gold hair, a soft, oval face which spoke of joy and innocence, and of the charming gaiety of youth.

As though Lucia had read his thoughts she spoke suddenly.

"You are becoming quite a figure in the sporting world of Cairo, aren't you? I hear of you as an excellent tennis-player—you and Sir Eric Mayne's little niece are looked on as a formidable pair for the Tournament next week, or so I'm told. But I suppose I ought not to call her little. She is really quite grown-up—in her own estimation, at least."

He answered her briefly.

"I don't know Miss Rivers's age, but I suppose she is what one calls grown-up."

"Yes. I think she is really—grown-up."

She had spoken with apparent lightness; but something in her manner annoyed the young man; and he stopped abruptly.

"With your permission I will leave you now, Lady Lucia." They had reached the garden of Mena House. "You have friends here, I understand?"

"Yes—my companion and my motor are here," she said indifferently. "Perhaps it will be as well to say good-bye now. There are so many of one's friends to be found at Mena House at tea-time. Isn't that Count Rossi over there at a table by himself?"

He looked in the direction she indicated; and beneath a tall tree he saw the Italian sitting holding grave converse with a white-clad, red-sashed Arab servant.

"Yes. It is Rossi."

"I thought so. I wonder where Miss Rivers is? When one sees him, one looks for her nowadays. Isn't it so?"

"Miss Rivers?" His voice was stern. "No. I have never connected the two in my mind for a moment." He hardly realised that he was lying.

"No?" She looked at him, and her brilliant eyes were full of malice. "Then I'm afraid your mind has missed the very obvious connection! And yet—I don't know: they are very quiet over it, very cautious—*bien entendu!*—but surely I am right in supposing that Count Rossi intends to make Miss Rivers his countess?"

"His countess? You mean—to marry her?" His tone was unconsciously grim.

"My dear Galahad, haven't you ever heard of marrying and giving in marriage? Or don't you approve of matrimony?" Her eyes laughed insolently into his.

"Of marriage—yes. But not of such a marriage as that would be."

"Why not? I think it would be a very suitable match," said Lady Lucia Holland sweetly.

## VI

At three o'clock on a fine afternoon a few days after Romney's rendezvous by the Sphinx, the Sports Club was crowded with a gay throng of visitors who had come to participate in or lend their patronage to the tennis tournament, which had already lasted two days, but was expected to finish before sunset.

As Lady Lucia had suggested, Romney and Miss Rivers had been drawn as partners in the contest; and Romney, for one, had no fault to find with the arrangement.

As he watched Valerie talking to a friend in an interval between the games, a slim, gold-haired figure in her spotless white array, he was again irresistibly reminded of Atalanta, the forerunner and prototype of the modern athletic girl. There was something so gallant, so upright about Valerie's bearing, she carried her fair head so proudly, her walk was so lithe and free, without suspicion of angularity, that she conformed far more closely to the ancient Greek ideal of girlhood than did many of her contemporaries.

Her tennis-playing was good, exceptionally so for her years; but there were many brilliant players in the Club; and it was largely owing to her partner's exertions that she found herself, to her own delight, duly qualified for the final round of the tournament.

"Well done, Valerie!" Sir Eric patted her shoulder as she flung herself down for a brief rest before proceeding further. "Whom do you meet now? Lady Thirsk, isn't it, and Captain Birmingham?"

"I don't know, Uncle Eric." She laughed. "I hope they will be merciful, anyway. I feel quite nervous at getting so far, but it's all due to Mr. Romney's play."

"Not a bit of it, Sir Eric." Romney spoke decisively. "Miss Rivers is at the very top of her form to-day—can't miss a ball."

"Well, keep it up, Val." Her uncle was pleased with her success. "Remember the prize which awaits you if you win the final—though I hardly expect such luck, with such a redoubtable couple against you!"

"A prize—that sounds exciting." Victor smiled. "Miss Rivers, you'll never forgive me if I let you down! But honestly, if you go on as you've begun, you needn't be afraid even of Countess Chris!"

"But has Lady Thirsk qualified?" It was one of their late opponents who asked the question. "I had an idea Mrs. Graham and Count Rossi won the last round, and if so, you'll have a pretty stiff tussle, I expect."

"Mrs. Graham and Count Rossi——"

Valerie's voice died away; and the first speaker, a young man in the Irrigation Department, hastened to reassure her.

"Oh, you needn't be nervous, Miss Rivers! Rossi isn't half as good as your partner, and though Mrs. Graham is excellent, well, you can give her at least ten years, you know"—he sank his voice mischievously—"and that is everything in a stiff game of tennis!"

"But are you sure they won? I thought Lady Thirsk was safe to win." Valerie was pale.

"I'm not a bit sure, but I'll go and find out," returned the Irrigation man cheerfully. "Just a moment, and you shall learn your fate, Miss Rivers!"

He grinned cheerfully, and moved away; but even as he did so a woman detached herself from the little group of people with whom she had been chattering lightly, and came towards Valerie, swinging her racquet gaily.

"Well, Valerie, so you and I are to meet now!" She smiled. "After our last battle I really haven't got an ounce of strength left, so I hope you and Mr. Romney will not prove too energetic!"

She did not look in the least fatigued as she stood talking, a supple figure all in white. Although she was nearing thirty there was youth in every movement she made, every glance which shot from her bright and smiling eyes; and it was evident that the two were not unequally matched.

"We had a hard fight, too," returned Valerie. "But Mr. Romney pulled us through—though I can't imagine how we've managed to get into the finals!"

"Rumour has it that Miss Rivers plays tennis as she plays bridge—with a true genius for the game." A new, suave voice joined in the conversation; and turning, Valerie found Count Rossi at her elbow.

Watching, Romney saw a flood of crimson sweep into the girl's face; and stepping forward before she had time to reply, he suggested easily that the light would not continue good a great while longer.

"No. You are right." The Italian bowed politely. "We had better begin—if the ladies are ready."

"I'm quite ready." Valerie did not look at the speaker as she picked up her racquet from the seat beside her. Then, as the quartet began to move towards the court, she turned impulsively to Victor and spoke in a lower tone.

"Mr. Romney, I believe, after all, I *am* a little tired. But—I'll do my best if you—if you will help me."

Something in the wistful tone made Romney feel oddly protective. He could not but remember the episode of the letter which he had posted for her; and her uncle's subsequent allusion to the foreigner's love-making; and he felt suddenly assured that in spite of appearances she both feared and disliked the smiling Count.

"I'll do my best to save you, Miss Valerie." He had never used her name before; and she felt vaguely comforted. "Don't exert yourself. I'm quite fresh, and with a little luck we ought to put up a good fight."

She smiled, and a tinge of colour crept into her face; and a moment later the four took their places on the court and play began.

It was soon evident that this was to be a close contest. Mrs. Graham was a more experienced player than her younger opponent, but Valerie was quicker in her movements, and what she lacked in skill she made up in activity and strength of wrist. Count Rossi and Romney were very equally matched; but there was a touch of the erratic in the Italian's brilliance which was lacking in the Englishman's quiet resourcefulness.

As the game progressed Romney shot more than one anxious glance at his young partner. Hitherto she had played gaily, light-heartedly, putting forth her best efforts, certainly, but with a cheerful gaiety which seemed to betoken an enjoyment of the game as a game, which she wished indeed to win, but loved also for its own sake, apart from the result.

But now she was palpably nervous, uncertain, overanxious. When, as sometimes happened, she missed her ball, she flushed and paled by turns, and her lips positively quivered as she murmured an apology for a bungled service which gave away a game.

Gone was the gallant bearing, gone the proud lift of the head; and in the place of the adorable Atalanta he was beginning to know there was surely a shy school-girl who feared her own lack of skill and thereby increased her clumsiness.

The first sett ended in victory for Rossi and Mrs. Graham; and as they crossed to the other side of the net Romney found occasion to whisper an encouraging word to the pale girl who walked dejectedly beside him.

"Cheer up, Miss Rivers! Mrs. Graham is palpably tiring, and when once you get the length of Rossi's balls, there's very little to be afraid of in them!"

"I'm so sorry"—to his surprise she was breathless. "I—somehow I can't play against Count Rossi. He—he makes me nervous."

"Oh, nonsense!" He judged it better to speak bracingly. "That's simply absurd, you know! You played splendidly against our late opponents, and Major Browning was a far better player than this fellow."

She looked at him; and in her eyes he read something he could not understand.

"I am very sorry to be so tiresome, Mr. Romney." She spoke with a kind of wistful dignity. "I will try not to give way to—nerves—again."

There was no time for more. The other pair were waiting to play; and as Valerie quietly took her place and began her service, Romney noticed that something of the Atalanta had returned to her pose.

Whatever the cause, it was evident that she was determined to conquer her nervousness; and in this second sett she played magnificent tennis. As the games progressed the spectators devoted all their attention to the slim girl in white who seemed to be, for the moment, possessed with the genius of the game. And when the sett ended, after a prolonged rally between the Italian and Valerie, in victory for the latter, there was a round of hearty applause for the victors.

Romney, delighted with the girl's command of herself, could not refrain from an admiring word.

"Miss Rivers, you're simply irresistible when you play like that! Mrs. Graham is getting quite demoralised, and if you can keep it up, we are sure winners."

Flushed and pleased, she looked up at him with something of the old camaraderie in her glance.

"It's you who are pulling me through," she said. "By myself I should be nothing—a mere bundle of nerves; but with you back me up I can face even Count Rossi himself!"

"Splendid!" He smiled down at her with unusual tenderness. " I like that spirit—and it's going to carry us through to victory ! "

They were again crossing to the opposite side of the net, and at that moment they met their opponents, and stopped to exchange a few laughing words.

" Valerie, you're a little wretch ! " Mrs. Graham spoke half mockingly, but there was a flush on her smooth cheeks which betokened a slight annoyance. " In the first sett I thought we were to have an easy win, and now you've taken to playing like a book ! "

" I'm sorry," said Valerie, smilingly. " But you know Uncle Eric's promised me a gold bracelet if I win, so I simply must do all I can to get through ! "

Mrs. Graham smiled and turned to speak to Romney; while Rossi leaned towards Valerie and murmured something in a low tone which Victor did not catch.

He noticed, however, the start the girl gave; and he heard her reply, spoken with a curious accent of half-timid defiance.

" No—a hundred times no ! " She looked at him steadily, though her cheeks were crimson.

In reply Rossi sank his voice. But Romney's ears were quickened by a sudden very vivid curiosity; and he listened unobtrusively to every word.

" No? " Rossi indulged in a smile—a flash of white teeth beneath the black moustache. " Yet, Signorina, remember one thing. There are other games—played for higher stakes—higher stakes even than money "—Romney, watching, saw the girl wince—" and in them the victory is always mine. . . ."

The last words sound[illegible]ly like a threat; and when he glanced at Valerie, Romney saw that she had changed colour, and looked like one who has been struck a blow in a vital place. Every vestige of the pink flush had left her cheeks, her eyes were wide open and bereft of light; and there was no doubt that whatever the inner significance of Rossi's speech might be, it carried some very real menace to the girl to whom it was addressed.

Quite instinctively Romney placed himself before his partner to shield her from curious eyes; and luckily the next moment saw the resumption of play for the final and deciding sett.

But now Romney found, to his dismay, that whether owing to Rossi's words or to some other unexplained cause, Valerie's form had once more deserted her.

She seemed, indeed, hardly to know what she did, though she served mechanically when it came to her turn, and took such balls as came her way with queer, automatic regularity. Gone were the flashes of brilliance, gone the calculation, the precision in placing her balls which had earlier proved her skill, for all her youth. Gone were the swift, swallow-like rushes to return some almost unreachable service, gone the deadly length and smoothness which had made her own service almost unplayable; and as Romney played doggedly on, hampered at every turn by his partner's feebleness, he discovered a curious factor in the game which had hitherto escaped his notice.

Beyond their inevitable services and returns, he and Mrs. Graham were being quietly dropped out of the game, which was becoming a kind of duel between Rossi and the girl—a duel deliberately engineered, or so it seemed, by the smiling Italian beyond the net. Again and again the balls were returned to Valerie, who, beneath this constant attention, began to flounder hopelessly. In vain did Romney try to help her, in vain did he poach shamelessly in order to give her a breathing space. It seemed as though Rossi were bent on tiring her out, wearing her down; and though such tactics were doubtless permissible, Romney could not but wonder whether at the back of this play there were not some stronger, less justifiable, motive than the mere beating of a plucky opponent.

Even the spectators were beginning to notice something; and when the score stood at four to one against them, Romney determined to try to save the situation by a bold stroke.

"Miss Rivers." He spoke in a low voice during the momentary interval caused by Mrs. Graham's attention to a loose shoe-lace. "Listen to me for a minute. Count Rossi is trying, in a very unsporting manner, to put the onus of winning or losing on you. I can't get a look in, try as I may. Well, if it is to be a fight between you, can you pull yourself together and beat him? I know you're tired, and I'm afraid you've lost heart a bit, but I'm certain that if you try you can do the trick. You know he's trying to frighten you, but you play a better game than he does, really. Will you try? I'll do all I can to help you, and I should simply hate to see Old England beaten by an Italian—Count or no!"

He laughed; and as he did so he congratulated himself on his inspiration, for a new light flashed in the brown eyes, the fair head reared itself proudly.

"Yes, I'll try!" She spoke quickly. "I've been slacking—at least, no. It wasn't that. I was really frightened, but I'm not now; and if you'll stand by me, I'll do my very best!"

"Good!" He kept his voice low purposely. "Of course, it's only a game, and whether we win or lose is immaterial. But—*I want to see you beat Count Rossi.*"

A second later the game was resumed. But to Count Rossi's palpable astonishment, and to the more or less unconcealed satisfaction of the spectators, the young English girl was once more, to quote Mrs. Graham, "playing like a book."

If this contest were indeed a duel, it was a duel to the death. If Count Rossi gave no quarter, neither did his fair-haired opponent. His most deadly strokes were parried, his dangerous tactics met and foiled; and he in his turn began to blunder in his play, to serve wildly, once or twice to send his balls into the net or out of the court altogether.

Romney, outwardly cool, inwardly flaming with excitement, did what he could to help his partner; and Mrs. Graham came occasionally to the Italian's rescue with a well-placed ball. But for the most part the game was between the two still; and as the score crept up until, incredible as it seemed, Victor and Miss Rivers held the lead, even the onlookers began to look oddly excited over the ultimate result.

With the score at five four, came Rossi's service; and as Victor glanced, rather apprehensively, at his partner, he saw that she was white to the lips, her breath coming quickly, as though the strain were telling ominously upon her.

He did not dare to speak to her. Better at this crisis to leave her alone; but as he noted her distress he told himself that there was something here which should by rights be investigated, since it was evident that it was Rossi the man, and not Rossi the tennis-player, with whom she was thus engaged in mental conflict.

He was strangely, incomprehensibly keen on winning the match. He told himself he would hate to see her beaten, after her gallant fight; and it seemed to him as though to win now would be the symbol of another, more significant victory, whose importance he could sense, though he could not understand its inner meaning.

The Italian's first service found Valerie prepared; and Rossi was confounded to find the ball magnificently returned—a return which took Mrs. Graham so completely by surprise that she missed her stroke altogether.

"Love fifteen." Even the umpire's voice betokened an unwonted excitement, so contagious was the electric atmosphere which surrounded the players. And as Rossi crossed the court, Romney pulled himself together to take his turn.

Inspired by Valerie's efforts, he, too, surpassed himself; and although Rossi returned the ball to Valerie, she was able easily to place it out of the other woman's reach.

"Love thirty." The umpire spoke quite sharply.

Again came a marvellously swift and intricate service; and again Valerie returned it as swiftly; after which a short rally ended in a ball of Rossi's going out of court.

"Love forty. . . . Romney and Miss Rivers lead," called the umpire, who by this time was almost dancing in his high seat; and for a second an expression of anger darkened the Italian's face.

As he braced himself for the effort which might decide the fate of the match, Romney told himself that they *must* win; and a sudden assurance came to him which nerved him to take the most dangerous ball of the afternoon with a coolness which surprised himself.

Swift as light Rossi returned it to Valerie. With equal swiftness she volleyed it; and then, while the spectators literally held their breath, they were treated to a magnificent rally such as had rarely been seen on those courts.

Inspired by heaven only knew what emotion, Valerie rose completely above her ordinary self, and played as though she were imbued by the very spirit of the game.

The end came suddenly. Up to now, Rossi, although determined, apparently, to smash his opponents, had played admirable tennis; but now, as though tiring of the contest and wishing to put an end to it, he dropped a ball just over the net in the evident belief that it was out of the girl's reach.

But with a rush which made the onlookers breathless, Valerie was upon the ball; and with a strength which was surely the last spurt of endurance, with, too, a splendid correctness of calculation, she returned it, with the swiftness of lightning, to the one spot in the court inaccessible to her foe. He made a gallant effort to reach it, lunged forward, missed, and the next instant the voice of the umpire arose shrilly, proclaiming Mr. Romney and Miss Rivers the winners of the match.

Flushed with victory, Romney hastened gaily towards his partner. But the words of congratulation died on his lips at the sight of her face.

Pale as a ghost, shaking from head to foot, she was swaying where she stood; and, rushing forward, he was just in time to catch her as, with a little moan, she fell into his arms in a faint.

## VII

" No, Sir Eric, there is really nothing to be anxious about." The doctor, an old friend, smiled as he took up his hat and gloves. " Your niece has nothing wrong with her—organically she's as sound as a bell."

" Yet she fainted away yesterday——"

" Quite so, but that fainting fit was due, primarily, to overexertion, aided, doubtless, by excitement "—he smiled—" and the heat of the day. The sun was really hot, you know, and to a young girl like Miss Valerie the result of a tournament means a good deal."

" Then there's nothing to worry about? "

" Nothing at all. Keep her quiet to-day, if you like ——"

" How about a tonic? "

Dr. Dryden smiled again.

"Don't fuss, my dear sir. I assure you the little lady in there doesn't need tonics. She's perfectly fit if you leave her alone—a splendid physique, though not on the overdeveloped side. A charming girl, too, and, if I may be allowed to say so, delightfully pretty."

"Rather too pretty!" Sir Eric smiled ruefully. "Half the young men in Cairo seem to share your opinion. I expect there will be an endless stream of inquirers presently!"

"Well, Cairo is always keen on pretty girls," said Dr. Dryden shrewdly. "And by the way, what an exceptionally handsome woman Lady Lucia Holland is. Those eyes and that figure—to say nothing of that complexion, which may or may not be genuine——"

"Yes." Sir Eric spoke shortly. "I suppose she is a beauty, though personally I am not an admirer of the lady's."

"No?" Dr. Dryden smoothed his hat thoughtfully. "Well, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, of course, and everyone doesn't admire that type of loveliness. But you must admit, the lady, for all her—well, reputation, behaves with the utmost circumspection these days."

"Yes. She has even gone the length of bringing a chaperone." Sir Eric smiled rather cynically. "Perhaps she realises what a narrow escape she has had——"

"Escape? Oh, you mean Sir Gordon died in time. Well, so he did; and by the way"—Dr. Dryden loved a little gossip—"what about that young Romney? There's—er—nothing between them nowadays, I suppose?"

"No." Sir Eric looked almost stern. "For my part I decline to believe there ever was anything. I believe the whole thing was, as the boy asserted, a put-up job on the woman's part."

"But"—the doctor put his hat down again in the interest of the discussion—"in that case, it seems she really wanted to marry the boy. And you know a woman of her beauty could pretty well pick and choose, so why choose a boy like young Romney?"

"Why not? My dear Dryden, you know as well as I do how capricious a woman—a lovely woman—can be. For some reason she set her heart on this man; he's good-looking, you know, in a bold, masculine kind of way—good features, well built. And few women can resist a pair of shoulders like Romney's, to say nothing of his blue eyes and that nice, boyish way he has of talking to them. I believe, honestly, that Lucia Holland wanted him to marry her for his physical perfections alone. Oh,"—the other man had uttered an exclamation—" it's no good pretending all women are romanticists, in love with a man's soul, his mind, his inner ego. Lots of them are rank materialists, and love as such. And I believe this Holland woman is one of them."

Dr. Dryden looked contemplative.

" You're right, of course, in a way. And I shouldn't wonder if this Lady Lucia is a case in point. But it says something for the boy that he could withstand so much beauty when it was literally flung at his head."

" He is a very decent youngster," said Sir Eric emphatically. It would be a sin to let that splendid youth and vitality be swallowed up by a vampire-woman like that enchantress. He's been a fool, I've no doubt ; but I for one trust the boy, and I'm pleased to welcome him here, not only for his father's sake, but for his own."

" He and Miss Val did well in the tournament yesterday."

" Yes, didn't they ! By Gad, I was delighted to see little Valerie standing up to that Italian fellow. Now there's a chap I can't stick. He had the impertinence to come hanging round Valerie at one time ; but I put a stop to that nonsense."

" They are bound to come across each other—everyone knows Rossi."

" Of course, of course. And I can't prevent that. And I didn't want to make a fuss and forbid her to speak to the fellow altogether, though I won't have him here. You see, I'm in a difficult position with that niece of mine."

Dr. Dryden looked sympathetic.

" You know Valerie comes into some money when she's twenty-one—quite a decent little fortune, of which she knows absolutely nothing. So far as I know, no one else has any idea the child has anything at all ; but I feel anxious, sometimes, lest it leak out and some fellow get hold of her for the sake of her money."

" Quite so. I quite appreciate your position." Dr. Dryden looked thoughtful. " But in any case Rossi couldn't have known anything of it, could he ? "

"No. I really don't think that's possible."

"Well, take my advice and don't worry over the little girl. She has a head on her shoulders—for all it's such a pretty one!—and I don't think she'll be taken in by any Italian Count!" He laughed. "Let her go her own sweet way, and she'll be a credit to you some day!"

"Yes." Sir Eric smiled in relieved fashion. "Well, good-bye, Dryden. You'll look in to-morrow?"

"What for?" He turned an astonished face towards his friend. "I've been talking to very little purpose if you don't understand the child is out of my hands! But there, you old bachelors are like a hen who's hatched out a duckling, and doesn't know what to do with it!"

He departed, chuckling. And after assuring himself that Valerie, already fully dressed and declaring herself perfectly well, was resting in the drawing-room of the flat, Sir Eric acquired his hat and stick and set forth briskly to keep an already overdue appointment.

For nearly an hour Valerie sat alone in the spacious, sunshiny drawing-room. She had promised her uncle to rest indoors till lunch-time, on condition that he motored her to Mena House for tea; and although she had assured the doctor that she was feeling in the best of health, she was not sorry to lie back in a corner of the couch and give herself up to quiet thought, without the necessity of making conversation.

She had recovered quickly yesterday, though it had been disconcerting to find herself the centre of attention when she opened her eyes after her temporary unconsciousness. Luckily, kind Dr. Dryden had been at hand to keep away well-meaning but officious onlookers; and she felt an odd little thrill of pleasure remembering that it had been Mr. Romney who had carried her off the sunny court into the shade.

Of what had preceded her faint she was not quite certain. Only she remembered an intense excitement, a fierce, almost painful throbbing of the heart, a wild resolve to win the game, even though she wore herself out in the effort.

Why the victory was of so much importance she alone knew—if indeed she could be said to possess such knowledge. Only she remembered Rossi's words as they stood together in the interval of the game; and as she recalled his calm boast of ultimate victory—in another contest—she shivered, all alone in the quiet, sunny drawing-room, and her heart seemed to miss a beat.

For only she and Rossi knew what lay between them—what memories linked them together in a partnership which she, at least, found almost intolerably irksome.

As she crouched in a corner of the couch, the sun streaming upon her and turning her fair hair to glittering gold, Valerie was living again in those bygone days which had seemed, at the time, so devoid of significance, yet were able now, in the retrospect, to blanch her cheeks, to enthrone a shrinking fear in her naturally fearless eyes.

She had met Rossi soon after her arrival in Cairo—met him informally at a little tea-party at Mena House, arranged to show her and one or two more newcomers the beauty of the desert at sunset, in that wonderful moment of irrigation which comes in the autumn, when so far as the eye can reach there lies a vast lake, reflecting the glories of the flaming sky in an exquisite symphony of quivering, rippling colour. Sir Eric had not been present on that occasion, and the hostess, a frivolous little *mondaine* of the type of Countess Chris, had seen no reason for excluding Count Rossi from her party because of the inclusion therein of a young girl of Valerie's age.

Rossi had been attracted to the pretty, brown-eyed girl; to the extent, at least, of constituting himself her companion for the afternoon, explaining, describing the marvels of Egypt so eloquently, so picturesquely, that she fell, entranced, under the spell of his magnetic personality. To the girl fresh from school Rossi's soft Southern tongue, his black Italian eyes, his courtly, polished manner, were a revelation; and when she found, as she quickly did find, that he was apt to seek her out in company, to monopolise her, discreetly, on the comparatively few occasions they met at dinner or dance, she could not resist a slight feeling of elation that he found it worth while to neglect other more important personages for the sake of a talk or a waltz with her.

This was very well, so far as it went; but gradually Rossi's manner altered, very subtly, not to alarm the girl, yet perceptibly, so that she, at least, could not ignore the delicate *nuance*, a faint deepening of interest, a slightly more intimate tone in the conversations on music and Egyptology with which he often entertained her.

Quite unconsciously Valerie was slipping into the position into which he wished to force her—that of the girl whom he evidently intended to make his wife. Yet he proceeded, on the whole, cautiously, for he was by no means sure that the time was ripe for the *coup* he intended, later, to effect.

There was no doubt that Valerie was flattered, pleased, by his attentions, was glad to meet him, enjoyed dancing with him; but so far she had shown no signs of anything but friendship; and he was beginning to wonder whether after all she would be startled—more, offended—by any open avowal of love.

Yet—time was precious. He had seen enough of Valerie to be assured that she would keep a promise, once made; and since, for all Sir Eric's belief to the contrary, Rossi was very well aware of Valerie's impending wealth—a knowledge which had come to him by accident—he was not going to let the chance of marrying her slip through his fingers.

For the proposed marriage meant a good deal to Count Paolo Rossi.

On the one side a vanished income, several uncomfortable debts, a generally impoverished existence spent out of his native land, since his own people had repudiated him of late. On the other side, a pretty young wife, and a fortune large enough to pay off his debts and ensure an easy-going existence for some years at least.

He supposed, with a cynical shrug of his shoulders, that he would have to marry the girl, which was a nuisance, since owing to his nationality and religion there was little hope of a divorce when he should have spent her money. Still—there were ways of rendering the matrimonial yoke easy to the neck which bore it; and in any case she would make a presentable Countess, and would quite possibly pave the way to a profitable reconciliation with his stiff-necked, but horribly influential relatives.

It was when matters had reached this stage, when Rossi was meditating a withdrawal from Cairo for a few weeks in the strategic hope of making the desired one's heart grow fonder, that Fate came to his aid, a pack of cards in one hand, an open cheque-book in the other.

Looking back on this sunny morning, Valerie could visualise all too plainly the events which had finally locked the fetters upon her wrists—the fetters which bound her, intangibly, to the man of whom [illegible] now she went in dread and aversion.

It had happened so quickly, so suddenly. She had been called upon to make the momentous decision so hurriedly, with no time for preparation; and that she had taken a false step Valerie now knew only too certainly.

Rather against her uncle's wish she had been admitted into the card-playing set of her friends; and since it soon became evident that by some freak of nature she was an exceptionally brilliant card-player, she was much in request with those hostesses who preferred bridge to dancing or the [illegible]

As Romney had discovered, Valerie's maximum [illegible] were small; and since many of the players were [illegible] married women who relied on their pin money to pay [illegible] debts, the stakes as a rule were [illegible] When, [illegible] sometimes happened, there was an outbreak of high play, Valerie quietly dropped out; and to do them justice [illegible] the women would have dreamed of persuading her to [illegible] beyond her modest means.

But it chanced that on the fatal night she had been taken by Countess Chris to the flat of a rich [illegible] American woman, whose ideas of fitting stakes, [illegible] by her own enormous income, were naturally high [illegible] her dismay Valerie found herself forced into the position of staking on a scale far above the usual one, and risking not only the sum she could afford [illegible] much larger one which she certainly could not.

To any one but [illegible], Valerie would have explained the whole situation [illegible] be allowed to slip quietly away. She did make [illegible] an attempt to engage Countess Chris' attention during [illegible] in the game; but the other woman treated the matter carelessly.

"My dear child, what do you mean to do—now? And leave Mrs. [illegible] Ralton in a hole? You know you were invited here in Lila's place, because of your excellent play; and in a small party like this"—there were only a dozen players present—"one person simply can't drop out without inconveniencing everyone."

"But [illegible] stakes [illegible] so high." There were actually tears in Valerie's brown eyes as she stood, flushed and unhappy, in her white chiffon frock, before the brilliant figure of Countess Chris.

"Well, what of that? If you lose you can borrow from me—if I have anything left!—or you must give an I.O.U. and get Sir Eric to pay up. Of course, he will do it at once, so don't be such an absurd child. Besides, you will probably win. You generally do."

The hostess was calling them impatiently; and Countess Chris fluttered away without a second look at the girl's troubled face.

Unable to recede from the position in which she found herself, Valerie took her place at the card-table; and for some time [illegible] luck held and she won a fair sum of money—enough indeed to pay her losses when, as presently happened, she began to lose, and yet leave a surplus for future operations.

When the party halted for a light supper, exquisitely cooked by the American's Chinese chef, who had accompanied her, protestingly, from New York, Valerie found Rossi by her side; and after Lady Thirsk's callous indifference to her woes, his [illegible] comprehension made him doubly attractive in the girl's eyes.

"[illegible] afraid of losing too much money, Signorina Valerie [illegible] smiled kindly as he slipped into a seat beside her at the [illegible]-table, which represented a small fortune in floral dec[illegible]. "But you have had luck up to now, and you know [illegible] should you lose, there is no need for immediate payment. A signed paper, a word to your debtor, and he—or she—will wait quite patiently until you are able to save up and pay the money. That's frequently done, you know. No one carries about huge sums of money, and ladies at least are not expected to produce cheque-books at a party!"

Seen thus, the matter seemed less pressing; and in spite of herself Valerie felt cheered, though even then she [illegible] justice to the marvellously prepared quails, the [illegible] *soufflé*, and the *pêche Melba*, which Ah Wung [illegible] mistress' hungry guests.

Never had Rossi been so kind, so entertaining [illegible] to her, and to her alone, anticipating her wants, [illegible] jokes, complimenting her on her play; with th[illegible] by the end of the meal the light had come back to her eyes, the delicate colour to the soft oval of her cheek.

But after supper she found to her consternation that even higher stakes were to be the rule; and since she was now placed at a table with three people unknown to her before this night she did not dare to protest, and began to play in a spirit of desperation which quickly merged into despair when she found herself steadily losing.

At the end of an hour-and-a-half's play she and her partner were in debt to the extent of a hundred and fifty pounds to their opponents; and when the moment of settlement arrived Valerie, white as a ghost, turned to M. Vennin, the young Frenchman with whom she had been playing, and addressed him rather unsteadily.

"M. Vennin, what, exactly, do we owe? A hundred and fifty pounds, isn't it? Then my share is seventy-five pounds?"

"*Oui, mademoiselle.*" The polite young Frenchman had already marvelled at the coolness of the English demoiselles, who sat down to play, staking large sums of money, with as much apparent coolness as they ate their dinner. Still, this particular young Englishwoman looked strangely white, there were purple shadows under her big, child-like eyes; and he found himself wondering whether the payment of this money was going to cause her serious inconvenience. This mental questioning led him to continue.

"*Mais, mademoiselle,* there is no need to incommode yourself, if it is not quite convenient to you to pay at this moment. Permit me to settle with our friends the enemy"—he smiled—"and the matter can rest between us—if you will honour me so far—until it is convenient to you to let me hear from you. Oh, I assure you, *mademoiselle,* it is a *bagatelle*—do not let it trouble you for one moment!"

The big eyes shot a beam of purest gratitude towards the speaker, but the fair head shook itself resolutely.

"You are more than kind, *monsieur,* and I am ever so much obliged to you. But there is no need for me to trouble you. I must just speak to Lady Thirsk a moment."

She slipped away from him and approached the last-named lady. Countess Chris, however, was volubly lamenting her own losses, which had taken, or so she averred, her last penny; and as she watched the older woman turn her absurd little gold bag upside down in confirmation of her words Valerie knew it was of no use to approach her in the matter.

But a word to Rossi—not an appeal for monetary help, the possibility of which never entered the girl's head; but a request for advice as to the best course to pursue—that seemed to her a harmless step to take; and she arrested him as he passed by with a whisper to which he was quick to respond.

"You owe seventy-five pounds, Miss Rivers? And you have paid away all your winnings save five pounds?" He smiled at the agitated girl and drew her aside into a little recess of the large room. "To whom, then, do you owe it —this vast sum?"

"The unfortunate part is that the other three were all men," she explained—there had been, indeed, only four women in the party. "And M. Vennin, who was my partner, is settling with his friend, Mr. Phillips, and I ought to settle with Captain Emary. To make matters worse Captain Emary is sailing on Friday for India, and I can't think what is to be done!"

She was almost on the point of tears; and Rossi had time for a harsh thought of his careless hostess, who allowed young girls to play for ridiculously high stakes. He did not know that Countess Chris had represented her as the petted niece of a wealthy man; or that Mrs. van Ralton would certainly have sent the girl home after supper, at the risk of spoiling her own party, had she known the true facts of the case.

"Miss Rivers,"—Rossi spoke formally, in English—"there are only two things to be done. Or rather, there is *one* of two things to be done."

"Yes?" She glanced up at him, and the tears now actually trembled on her eyelashes.

"One is this. Ask Captain Emary for the name of his ship and the ports at which it calls. Then get the money from your uncle, Sir Eric, with which to pay your debt."

"Oh, I couldn't!" She was aghast at the notion. "You know Uncle Eric doesn't like me playing at all, and he made me promise I would not exceed my allowance. He gives me a hundred a year, you know, and that ought to be heaps, seeing I have no expenses."

" You have no money of your own? " He spoke gently, and she could not know how eagerly he awaited her answer.

" No. None at all." She lifted her candid eyes to his face as she spoke, and he realised that what he had suspected was true—that she, in common with the rest of her world, was in ignorance of the fortune which would be hers when she attained her majority.

" Well, the other course—and the better one—is to permit me to advance the money, quite quietly—a transaction between ourselves; and you shall pay me back at your own convenience."

He had not meant to add the latter clause, intending this to lay her under a heavier obligation; but he was not yet altogether lost to the decencies of life, and the relief in her innocent eyes showed him that she saw no sinister purpose in his kindness.

Yet she demurred hastily.

" Oh—but I couldn't borrow from you, could I? It wouldn't be the right thing, would it? And—what would Uncle Eric say? "

" Oh, he mustn't know! " He laughed lightly, brushing aside her scruples cleverly. " It must be entirely between you and me. You can trust me, can you not, *signorina?* Why, we are old friends! "

" But I couldn't pay you back for ages! "

" No hurry for that. See, let me propose something." He laid his hand persuasively on her arm. " We will be very business like! You shall pay me interest on the money—so much per cent.! Now, how does that arrangement strike you, little lady? "

" Oh, yes—that would be splendid! " She flushed rosily. " Then I shouldn't feel half so uncomfortable about it. What shall I pay you, Count Rossi? Twenty per cent.? "

" *Cara signorina,* I am not a Jew! " A gleam of white showed beneath the black moustache. " If we are indeed to carry through this transaction, let us say two per cent. That satisfies you? "

" Oh, no—it must be at least five [illegible] She spoke earnestly. " Please let it be five; and how much is that on seventy-five pounds? "

He pretended to make calculations with a pencil on his shirt cuff, and then announced gravely that at five per cent. the interest would be eighteen shillings and ninepence a quarter, if she preferred to pay it that way. Otherwise it would be—he wrinkled his brow—one pound, seventeen shillings and sixpence per half-year.

" Oh, I'll pay it quarterly, please. But—have you got the money with you?"

" No." He bit his lip. " How could I forget! I have been unlucky, too." A new thought had entered his head, and he did not add that [illegible] had over a hundred pounds in notes in his pocket-book. ' A cheque—of mine—would be of no use. Let us consider, *signorina.* You are leaving now?"

" Yes, at once."

" Then I think it will be best for me to offer to take you to your home. La Contessa Chris is not ready yet, I feel assured of that; so we will go speedily in my motor to my villa and get the money. Then you shall put it in an envelope and post it to Captain Emary, so that he will receive it before he sails. *Voilà!* Is not that a good plan?"

" But—will it be safe—a large sum of money—in an envelope?"

" *Per Bacco, signorina,* you are right!" Again he pretended to consider. " Ah, but I think I see plainly at last. When I have eventually seen you safely at home I will drive on to the hotel where this Captain stays and leave the packet there for him. Now, is not that a good plan?"

He saw indecision dawning in her eyes, and decided to hurry matters on a little.

" Shall I say a word to Captain Emary—tell him I am taking you home, by Lady Thirsk's wish,"—his moustache hid a dawning smile—" and that I will return, with the money, on your behalf, when I have done so?"

" Yes, please. Perhaps that will be best." He could tell from her tone that she was still uneasy, and he gave her a last word of advice.

" See, here is Lady Thirsk. Let us ask her if she too is ready to go home."

He intercepted Countess Chris cleverly as she was passing by in conjunction with her hostess, and murmured a few words in Italian which Valerie did not catch.

Countess Chris replied in English.

" Go home? Oh, not for an hour yet. What, Miss

Rivers tired? Well,"—she looked round her vaguely—"someone must see her home, but my car isn't here yet."

"May I be permitted to take Miss Rivers home in my car? Or—I should prefer the walk, if I may send the lady home unattended." He spoke quietly, and Countess Chris' face brightened.

"Oh, if you don't want the car that would be a splendid idea. Sir Eric can't object if you're not there!" She lowered her voice mischievously.

"*Grazie, signora!*" Rossi murmured the words cynically, and Countess Chris laughed.

"Well, pack the child off, will you? She looks horribly white and dragged. I suppose I oughtn't to have brought her, but Lila Graham fell out at the last moment, and I couldn't think of any one else."

She turned to Valerie.

"Count Rossi is going to send you home in his car, Valerie." She spoke absent-mindedly, her eyes roaming hither and thither. "So I'll say good-night. For heaven's sake go to bed as fast as you can—you look exactly like a ghost!"

A moment later Valerie found herself outside the room, receiving her wrap from the smiling French attendant; and as she began to move down the stairs Rossi joined her, wearing a light coat, his opera hat under his arm.

"Now, *signorina.*" He crooked his arm round her elbow and piloted her down the dimly-lit stairs. "My car is waiting—we shall be home, as you English say, in no time, we find the money, you write your note—and *c'est fini!*"

He helped her into his luxurious car, murmured the words "*A casa!*" to the driver, a slim, reckless-looking Neapolitan, and the big motor glided smoothly away from the door.

Valerie felt too bewildered to speak when once she found herself in the car, the Italian as her sole companion. Shrinking back into a corner she drew the fur collar of her cloak closely round her, and her face was very pale. The white fur, the blue ribbon threaded through the pale gold of her hair, above all, the big, haunted-looking eyes, gave her the air of a veritable schoolgirl; and Rossi was careful to speak little, to treat her with the most gentle reverence, as the big car shot through the night.

He was wondering whether the girl had any idea of the seriousness of the proceeding, of the extreme unconventionality of this drive, alone with him, at this late hour of the night—for midnight was at hand. But he did not wrong her in his thoughts, even then. He knew well enough that she had grasped at his help as the drowning man grasps at the proverbial straw ; and he told himself quietly that it had been a stroke of luck for him that play had been high at Mrs. van Ralton's flat that night.

As for Valerie herself, the rest of the night's proceedings were dream-like, chaotic. She remembered, dimly, the swift rush through the darkness, the arrival at the villa which was Rossi's Egyptian home. She had wished to remain in the car while he entered, but he had persuaded her to accompany him ; and she had a vague recollection of a beautiful room, filled with exquisite pictures, curios, and statuettes, a large grand piano occupying one corner of the polished floor.

There had been a flower-decked little supper spread on the table ; but she had refused even so much as a peach, a cup of coffee, and Rossi did not press the matter.

Indeed, his manner now had become business-like, almost grave ; and he had handed her a bundle of notes in an envelope, and directed her where to sign the I.O.U., on which she insisted, with a ceremonious air which seemed to lend added formality to the rite.

She had scrawled a note to Captain Emary—a mere acknowledgment of her debt and its payment ; and Rossi had taken charge of the packet, promising to deliver it personally at the man's hotel.

That done, Rossi had not sought to detain her ; and in a wonderfully short space of time she had found herself again in the luxurious motor, speeding back to Cairo ; but on this second journey Rossi had himself driven the car, the Neapolitan chauffeur sitting alertly by his side.

They had passed Captain Emary's hotel *en route ;* and Rossi stopped the car and got out, giving directions to the man to drive Miss Rivers home. And as the clocks were striking one o'clock Valerie entered her uncle's flat like a silent ghost.

Sir Eric was away from home ; and no one, apparently, witnessed her return ; but it was dawn before Valerie slept.

Rossi had never alluded, in words, to that night's transactions, preserving, indeed, a scrupulous reticence on the subject ; but to Valerie, her instinct sharpened by the ordeal through which she had passed, this very silence was significant.

It was then that she began to ask herself if she were mistaken in supposing Count Rossi's manner towards her slightly different, slightly warmer, more *empressé,* since that fatal night.

And it was that very change in him, slight, almost imperceptible as it was, which had shown her the full measure of her indiscretion.

For all his fine courtesy, his charming deference, she could not feel at ease with him. She could never forget that there was a secret between them ; and as she moved about in the gay, worldly set into which Countess Chris had half-carelessly introduced her, heard, here and there, scraps of gossip, fragments of conversation, she began to realise into what a foolish indiscreet action she had been led by her own timidity.

She knew, now, that she should have gone to her uncle for help rather than to a man, a comparative stranger. Although she was too innocent, too inexperienced, to realise the full weight of her folly, she felt instinctively that did Cairo know what she had done, she would be severely condemned, if not ostracised, by many people ; and what Sir Eric would say she really could not, dared not conjecture.

She longed to be able to pay back the money she had borrowed ; and to that end began to save her allowance rigorously, and to refuse to play bridge for any but the most moderate sums. On the appointed date she had sent Rossi the " interest " on the loan ; and the envelope containing the money orders was the one Victor had posted for her on that by-gone night.

Rossi had acknowledged it—verbally, with a smile ; and, formally, in writing. But before then Sir Eric had taken alarm at the Italian's friendship with his young niece, and had given Rossi plainly to understand that such attentions as his were undesirable—a fiat which Rossi accepted with many charming apologies for his carelessness, and with a renewed determination to marry Sir Eric's niece—and her money—sooner or later.

It was after that conversation with Sir Eric that Rossi's manner grew more fervent. Although he could seldom see Valerie alone, there were occasions on which they were together in company; and, in spite of her uncle's embargo on their acquaintance, it was not always possible for Valerie to ignore the man completely, though an older, more experienced woman might have achieved the desired end by the exercise of [illegible]le diplomacy. And to her dismay the girl found the It[illegible] smilingly including her with himself in a little society of two, bound together by their mutual secret, and by the admiration he was ready, now, to express openly when they were alone.

But as Rossi grew, privately, more ardent, more lover-like, so did Valerie draw back. Somehow, although she was ceaselessly grateful to him for his prompt help, the link between them seemed to fret and gall her spirit. She was grateful—but she hated the obligation for gratitude. She felt sometimes that she would rather have been indebted to any casual stranger than to this smiling, black-eyed Italian; and as his advances, though still guarded, grew more ardent, so did she find herself less and less ready to accept the position into which she was forced—or rather, into which she had forced herself by her own rash and ill considered act.

When, as sometimes happened, he called her pretty, Southern names, held her hand while he murmured luscious Italian phrases in her ear, she shrank back, chilled and afraid; and only three days before the tennis tournament she had broken away from him at a dance, had fled, in a panic, from the conservatory in which he had attempted, for the first time, to kiss her. She hated his assumption of intimacy with her, his apparent belief in her readiness to enter into closer friendship with him day by day; and the real significance of his whisper to her on the tennis field had lain in the fact that he had alluded to her—so-called—victory of a few nights previously.

When she had reached this stage in her thoughts Valerie lay back on the big couch, her hands behind her head, and went over the scene at the Sports Club once more in fancy.

She remembered Romney's congratulations, the look in his face, the tone in his voice as he came towards her; and she remembered, too, that even as she found the world turning black before her eyes, and felt herself falling, falling forward into space, she knew a quick comfort in the thought that he was beside her. She was glad that it had been he and not Rossi who had carried her away; and as she visualised Victor's blue eyes, his laughing mouth, his strong, clean perfection of physique, she told herself despairingly that with such a man she might have felt safe.

If only he had been her creditor, if she had been indebted to him and not to Rossi! Somehow she thought the obligation would not have weighed so heavily upon her then; and yet—she could not imagine Victor Romney taking a girl alone to his house at midnight, no matter what his intentions might be.

She wished she could see him again; for his presence seemed miraculously to exorcise the unhappy and frightening thoughts which were associated with Rossi: and even as she formulated the wish to herself the electric bell of the flat whizzed with an aptness which seemed to promise a speedy realisation of her desire.

Breathlessly she sat up on the couch, listening intently while the Arab servant shuffled, in his red slippers, to the door; but though she strained her ears she could not catch the sound of the would-be visitor's voice.

A moment later she heard the slippers shuffling back towards her; and as the door opened softly and deliberately she sprang to her feet to greet the incoming guest.

But to her intense, almost uncontrollable disappointment, it was not Victor Romney who entered the room, the smiling Arab standing aside without attempting to pronounce the visitor's name.

The visitor was Lady Lucia Holland.

## VIII

For a moment, taken aback, Valerie gazed at her visitor.

This was the first time Lady Lucia had come to the flat, since Sir Eric's attitude towards her, though always perfectly courteous, had never been of a nature to encourage her to seek out his niece; and for a wild second Valerie wondered whether the visitor had mistaken the flat for that of some other friend. The next instant Lucia spoke; and Valerie knew that her conjecture had been incorrect.

"Miss Rivers—how glad I am to see you are better!" Her voice was softer than usual. "You really alarmed us yesterday—and I was pleased to have an excuse to drop in this morning!"

"Thanks very much." Valerie's common sense had come to her aid, and she spoke quite naturally. "Do come and sit down. It is very kind of you to bother about me."

"Not at all." Lady Lucia sat down, beautifully, on the big divan, her luminous eyes roving over the girl's flushed face. "Your faint caused quite a sensation yesterday afternoon. I am afraid you exerted yourself too much."

"I think perhaps I did." She spoke quietly. "And the sun was hot. But we had a splendid game."

"Yes. And you won, splendidly. Of course, Mr. Romney plays a good game, as you doubtless discovered in the course of the afternoon."

She spoke lightly; and Valerie, who knew nothing of the story which linked the name of the woman before her with that of Victor Romney, replied unsuspiciously.

In spite of herself she was intrigued by Lady Lucia's visit. Of course, her indisposition of yesterday was really sufficient cause—and already two or three inquiries after her health had been received by telephone; but this was the first occasion on which Lady Lucia had shown the slightest interest in her or her doings; and this call was certainly an unusual proceeding. Sitting opposite to Lady Lucia, she admitted to herself that the latter was absolutely the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. To-day Lucia was wrapped in sables, for the wind had changed and blew keenly; and out of the rich brown of the fur her face rose like a lovely flower, the almost magnolia-whiteness of her perfect skin tinted with the most delicious carnation pink—either by that same keen wind or by the fingers of a clever maid. Her wonderful eyes, with their splendid lashes, looked out beneath her delicate brows with the calm gaze of an empress; and every line of her features, every curve of her figure, every turn of her head, betokened the security bred of life-long belief in her own surpassing loveliness.

Seen with her, Valerie's own charm, the charm of youth and freshness, sank into the second place; yet Lady Lucia herself was observant enough to realise that Valerie, in her own way, had very considerable claims to notice; and since, for all her faults, Lucia Holland was not vain of her beauty, she conceded to the girl on whom, or so it seemed, she was beginning to look as a rival, a meed of admiration which would have astonished the other had she known of it.

For this was what had brought Lucia Holland to the flat to-day.

Hitherto, although she had been a bitterly disappointed woman, Lady Lucia had been spared the fiercer pangs of jealousy.

Although Victor Romney had refused her love, his departure from England had made it clear that no other woman held sway over his heart; and in the depths of her being Lucia had felt a certainty that she herself was the only woman he had even known, in anything more than the passing society way in which a young man is acquainted with the women whom he meets at dinner parties or dances, at the theatre or Ranelagh.

And this being so, she had been content to wait until Fate, aided by a woman's determination, should bring him once more within her orbit.

Unknown to all the world Lucia had heard, by one of the minor coincidences of life, of Romney's intention to join his friend in Cairo; and her own arrival there was entirely due to the fact of her knowledge.

Lucia Holland had never loved Sir Gordon, though it had suited her to marry him. But she loved Victor Romney—loved him fiercely, madly, violently, as only a woman of her type—the type of *grande amoureuse*,—can love, with a love which devastates rather than develops, in which the purer fire of tenderness pales before the flame of passion—a fire which if it be not fed with the fuel of reciprocity will break into a devouring, scorching mass of flames which will destroy all whom it may reach.

Why Lucia Holland thus loved Victor Romney is one of those eternal problems which only a student of psychology can hope to solve. He was an ordinarily good-looking young man, well-built certainly, in a more than common degree; but she was an exceptionally lovely woman. He was comparatively poor—she was wealthy. His tastes were simple, the tastes of a sportsman, combined with a genuine love for music and a nice, though by no means precious, discrimination in literature. She was *mondaine* to the finger-tips, luxury-loving, erotic in her tastes, a follower of the bizarre in music and art, clever with the shrewdness of the society woman, capricious to a degree only found in one whose path in life has been smoothed, perpetually, by wealth and flattery.

And above all she was a woman of fascination, a woman who had in the highest degree the gift of charm—that gift made up largely of a preponderance of sex-magnetism; a gift which bestows on its owner the right to pick and choose her own friends and lovers.

Yet out of all the world of possible conquests she had chosen Victor Romney. And that he would remain adamant beneath her renewed attack she had never believed—until now.

She had meant to go to work warily, to begin with a delicate coldness mingled with a kind of proud sensitiveness which would surely appeal to his chivalry. Knowing the power of public opinion she had meant to let him understand, very subtly, that she was at his mercy here in Cairo; that she could not but feel keenly her position as the woman whom he had openly slighted, the woman on whom other women would look with light pity, not unmingled with wondering scorn.

She had no objection to being, temporarily, the object of scorn, were it but a means to her end; and possibly she knew very well that the lovely Lady Lucia Holland, with her motor-car and her sables, her ermine and her wonderful pearls, was in reality beyond the reach of women detractors.

True, she had cut Victor openly in Countess Chris' drawing-room; but then, how could she have acted otherwise? And the interview by the Sphinx had been carefully planned, so that, unknown to Victor, half a dozen of their mutual acquaintances had been cognisant of the meeting.

Hitherto she had never really doubted her power to win him, eventually, for herself. She was inclined to blame herself for her earlier precipitancy. She had acted unwisely, had lost her head, had been too eager, in too great haste to snatch the gift she desired; and she had been repaid for her premature action by Romney's abrupt withdrawal from her life. Had she waited a few weeks longer, waited until her shackles had been firmly fastened upon her victim, he had not escaped her so easily. But her over-haste had betrayed her; and she had acted before the moment was ripe.

But she had told herself passionately that in Cairo she would win him back. She had meant to be so seductive, so sweetly, almost shyly ready to forgive his former repudiation, so quietly, unobtrusively pathetic, that he could not, for very shame of his manhood, withstand her appeal. That he might at times feel some inward reproach for the part he had played, she knew instinctively; and she meant to play, very delicately, very artistically, upon that self-reproach.

She was ready to bend all the force of her nature towards his subjugation; and she had dreamed of his gradual surrender with a genuine belief in her power to bring him, this time, to her feet.

And since she knew well enough that his was not the temperament of the pleasure-seeker, who makes the pursuit of woman the chief motive in his life, she had felt no real doubt on the subject of her own ultimate success until the moment in which she saw the look in Romney's eyes as he rushed across the tennis court to catch the fainting Valerie in his arms. . . .

For that was the look she had striven, a dozen times, to conjure up in the eyes of the man she wanted, passionately, for her lover; and as she noted the involuntary tenderness with which he carried away the unconscious girl, a cold hand clutched at Lucia's heart, and for the first time in her life she knew what it was to feel jealousy, bitter, burning jealousy of another woman.

This, then, was the explanation of her call upon Valerie this morning; but since another reason was plainly called for, she lost little time in explaining, charmingly, the meaning of her visit to the flat.

"Rumour has it that Sir Eric had promised you a handsome piece of jewellery if you won the tournament." Lucia smiled, fingering her fabulously valuable pearls as she spoke. "Has he had time yet to fulfil his promise?"

"No." Valerie smiled. "I believe he is going to bring me something to-day. He suggested a gold bracelet, but I asked for something else—something uncommon—an antique necklace from the *Bazars*, or something of the kind."

"You like uncommon jewellery?"

"Yes. At least—I don't care much for it at all. I always feel 'dressed up,' as though I were in fancy dress, when I wear any."

In this speech Lucia recognised her cue; and like the accomplished actress she was she took it calmly, without haste.

"I hope you haven't any objection to 'dressing up.'" She spoke gently, with an amused smile. "Because I am really here this morning to ask you to take part in a huge 'dressing up' carnival. In other words, to appear in a series of *tableaux vivants* which are to be presented in Cairo in a few weeks' time."

"*Tableaux vivants?* But I thought they had gone out of fashion?" Valerie sat upright, bright-eyed, and looked eager interrogation at her visitor.

"Not as we shall do them," returned Lucia superbly. "Don't mix them with the ordinary village tableaux—a sort of glorified waxworks!" She laughed rather scornfully. "I assure you our pictures will be worth seeing. To begin with, M. Lammin, who is, as you know, an artist of note, is taking them in hand. Some of the pictures, indeed, are to be done from sketches of his own. Others will be taken from famous pictures."

"And do you really want me to take part?"

"Certainly. The Committee—Lady Thirsk, Mrs. Graham, Mrs. van Ralton; oh, half a dozen more, have drawn up a list of possible performers; and your name, of course, figures among them."

"I'd love to do it," declared Valerie, her eyes sparkling, the optimism of youth asserting itself above her former gloom. "When—and where—is it to be? And is it in aid of something?"

"I believe so." Her manner indicated an utter absence of interest. "As for the rest, nothing is definitely settled. But when your uncle buys you the promised prize, pray choose something that will come in useful for stage wear."

"How lovely your pearls are!" Valerie could not resist the appreciation. "Aren't you almost afraid to wear them? In case they should be lost—or stolen from you?"

"Oh, they are safe enough on me," returned Lady Lucia carelessly, holding out the rope of pearls as she spoke. "They are rather fine ones, aren't they? A hundred and twenty of them, and all perfectly graduated."

"They suit you so well." Beneath Lady Lucia's manner something of Valerie's former shyness of the famous beauty had begun to evaporate. "Pearls make some people look so yellow—but on you they are just perfect."

"They are well enough," said Lucia Holland, dropping the jewels from her hand again, so that they fell in a shimmering cascade against the lace of her blouse. "Personally I prefer coloured stones—rubies, sapphires, emeralds. But as for you,"—she rose as she spoke, and stood smiling lazily down at her young hostess—"you don't require any jewels yet, my dear! I assure you, though of course you won't believe me, youth is a far more becoming ornament than the most superb jewel ever dug out of the heart of the earth!"

"Must you go?" Lucia was turning towards the door, and Valerie hoped her blushes had gone unseen. "But you haven't told me who is to take part in the pictures. Is there any one I know?"

Lady Lucia ran through a little stream of names; then added casually:

"Of course, Mr. Romney will have to take his part. He is quite the best-looking man in Cairo this year. Do you agree with me, or is Count Rossi more to your taste?"

She had purposely introduced the two names thus in juxtaposition; and for all their languor her blue eyes were very keen as they rested on the girlish face beside her. What she had expected to read there she could hardly have said; yet when the flush which greeted the sound of Victor's name died away in a deadly pallor, she told herself, with a fierce congratulation on her own insight, that she had been right in thinking there was some understanding between Rossi and this innocent-looking schoolgirl.

And since an alliance between the two was a consummation devoutly to be wished, thereby rendering anything in the nature of friendship between Valerie and Victor unlikely, Lucia Holland resolved, in that one glancing moment, to do all that lay in her power to further an alliance which would make Valerie Rivers the wife of Count Paolo Rossi.

What the result of such a union would be mattered little to her. That it would be successful was, to her thinking, hardly likely, for Lucia Holland, blind where her own love was concerned, was almost uncannily clear-sighted towards the rest of the world; and she had no delusions on the score of Rossi's worthiness to marry a young girl.

Yet since Valerie Rivers appeared likely to prove a menace to her own cherished plan, Lucia was capable of sweeping the girl out of her path as ruthlessly as she would have swept aside a spider which had ventured to crawl over her hand.

Valerie's tell-tale flush, succeeded by an equally revealing pallor, had given Lucia all the information she needed, for the moment at least; and without waiting for an answer to her question, she held out her hand with the grace natural to her.

"Good-bye, Miss Rivers. I am sure everyone will be pleased to hear of your recovery. And we may count upon your help in the pageant, or whatever the entertainment is to be called?"

"I shall be delighted." But Valerie's former buoyancy of manner was quenched; and the sudden opening of the door might have been supposed to be an actual relief to her, judging from the eagerness with which she turned to see who was at hand.

But her nerves, already strained by her interview with her present caller, were to be subjected, or so it seemed, to still further discipline on this sunshiny morning.

For the new visitor, whose arrival had passed unnoticed in the mental stress of the moment, was none other than Count Paolo Rossi himself.

He entered the room quietly, with his usual debonair self-possession; and as Lady Lucia's blue eyes noted the extreme, almost finicking precision of his dress, the gloss on his varnished boots, above all, the bunch of priceless roses which he held in one hand, she told herself with a fierce, exultant leap of the heart that she had indeed been correct in her surmise regarding these two.

For a second Valerie stood motionless, as though turned to stone before this most unexpected invasion of what she had come to look upon as sanctuary. The next second she realised that to Rossi, too, her unfortunate indisposition had given a chance he was not likely to forgo; and with a courage which did her credit she welcomed her latest visitor quietly.

"Good morning, Count Rossi." She held out her hand, and he deftly transferred the beautiful roses from his own to hers. "Are these for me? But how lovely they are!—thank you so much."

He murmured a few words of smiling depreciation, and bowed with the slightest touch of flamboyancy; while Lady Lucia inwardly thanked the Providence which had given her this admirable chance of viewing the situation for herself.

So determined, indeed, was she to take advantage of this fortuitous encounter that she delayed her departure sufficiently long to introduce the topic of the projected entertainment to the newcomer.

When his inquiries as to Miss River's health had been answered, and due felicitations expressed on her complete recovery, Rossi turned courteously towards Lady Lucia, who had languidly uttered a greeting.

"*Buon giorno, signora!*" Having thus paid his graceful tribute to Lady Lucia Holland's well-known ability as a linguist, Rossi continued speaking in his fluent, staccato English. "Like myself, I presume you have made inquiries as to Miss Rivers' well-being!"

"Of course." Her splendid eyes rested, indolently, on his olive-skinned face. "But I was also the bearer of an invitation to Miss Rivers to take part in a performance to be given in aid of the perennially distressed Armenians." She could, it seemed, remember the object of the charity when necessary.

"Ah, the tableaux!" He smiled, showing his white teeth. "You, madame, are doubtless one of the performers. And—has Miss Rivers also succumbed to the eternal temptation of what you English call—'make believe'?"

"Yes, indeed I have!" Valerie spoke more freely than her wont, and Rossi shot a quick glance at her out of his black eyes. "Provided, of course, that my uncle has no objection."

"You will let me know, then, when you have consulted him." Lady Lucia laid her hand on the girl's shoulder. "Or—write to Lady Thirsk. I believe she is the moving spirit of the affair."

"Ah, *la belle contessa!*" Rossi waved a hand airily, as though in homage to the absent. "If Lady Thirsk act fairy godmother—I have it right, *si?*—to the fête—performance—what you will, it is bound to succeed."

"I'll tell her what you say," said Lady Lucia carelessly. "I believe you are to be impressed into the service of the wretched Armenians, Count Rossi. And, of course, as a man of leisure, you will not refuse to help."

"Refuse! *Ma, signora!*" He spread protesting hands. "How can I, Paolo Rossi, an unworthy representative of the most gallant, most self-sacrificing nation upon earth, refuse anything to a committee of beautiful ladies?"

"Well, I must fly," observed Lucia nonchalantly. "It must be nearly lunch time, and I have a hundred and one things to do this afternoon."

"I, too must bid you *au revoir*, Miss Rivers." Rossi had no mind to encounter Sir Eric Mayne, although his visit, as Valerie's opponent on the previous day, was certainly warranted on grounds of the merest courtesy. "I am indeed relieved to find you are recovered from your exertions. May I add my belated congratulations on your striking victory?"

He bowed over her hand, and hastened to open the door for Lady Lucia, who nodded casually to her hostess with a murmur of farewell, and then preceded the Italian out of the room.

Her beautiful limousine was waiting for her in the street, in close conjunction with Rossi's slightly less luxurious motor; and the latter's Neapolitan chauffeur was engaged in what seemed to be a somewhat laboured conversation with Lucia's more stolid Englishman. The two parted abruptly as their employers emerged; and Rossi handed Lucia into her car with careful courtesy.

But when the limousine had rolled away, and the Italian chauffeur opened the door of Rossi's car, the latter shook his head.

"I am going to walk, Luigi." He spoke abstractedly. "Do not wait for me. You may go home; do you understand me?"

"*Sissignore.*" Luigi was used to the moods of his master, and without more ado he mounted into his seat, let in the clutch and glided smoothly away along the sun-flecked road.

A new and startling thought had flashed into Rossi's mind as he stood opposite to Lady Lucia in Valerie's drawing-room just now, his quick eye taking in at a glance her marvellous beauty, which, seen in the searching Egyptian light, was strangely flawless.

Hitherto he had not paid much attention to Lady Lucia. They had met, from time to time, but had rarely come into anything more than very passing contact; and he had paid little or no attention to the gossip which, since her arrival in Cairo, had buzzed merrily round her name.

He knew, of course, that her husband had sought to divorce her, and had died ere the decree was made absolute. He had heard, also, that young Romney was the man to whom the world had pointed as her lover; and had supposed, with a cynical shrug of the shoulders, that their meeting in Cairo had been a pre-arranged thing. Yet it had very soon become evident that whatever relations might have existed between them in the past, there was nothing in the nature of a bond between them now.

On seeing Valerie turn pale and sway helplessly, Rossi had sprung forward to save her from falling; and he had seen the look in Victor Romney's eyes as he reached the fainting girl and carried her away in his arms.

And to Rossi that look was significant. Not so would the lover of Lady Lucia Holland look at another woman; and yet, unless the Italian's almost femininely acute intuition had led him astray, Lady Lucia was in Cairo for no other purpose than the subjugation of the man who had hitherto refused the bounty she had so royally offered him.

"The position, then, is this." So mused Count Rossi, as he strolled meditatively along, smoking a thin, black cigar. "The beautiful Lady Lucia loves the Englishman. He, in turn, is fast falling in love with my little Valerie. And she—*chi lo sa?*"

He smiled to himself, and waved a hand airily in greeting to a compatriot who hurried by on the shady side of the street.

"But—I cannot allow Miss Rivers to transfer her allegiance to this big Englishman. Her *dot* will be much more profitably spent by Paolo Rossi! Money I must have, and the only way in which I see it arrive is through the hands of *la petite Valerie.*"

Suddenly he came to a standstill, and uttered an expletive which sounded fierce, but was in reality merely the outward expression of a new and startling thought.

"*Per Dio—why not?* Donna Lucia—beauty, birth, above all, money. She is fabulously wealthy, so they say—and her furs and jewels must have cost much money. And, too, she is a woman whom any man might be proud to own as his Contessa! Let her realise that the fool of an Englishman has eyes for none but Sir Eric Mayne's niece, and who knows what may happen?"

A second later he resumed his walk.

"She is still infatuated with the young man, but what of that? *Souvent femme varie*—let her understand that he is not for her, and it will be strange if she does not change what she doubtless calls her mind! Courage, Paolo! The House of Rossi shall yet welcome you with open arms!"

And having come to this satisfactory conclusion Count Paolo Rossi walked briskly on through the sunny streets, humming gaily in a robust tenor voice, *"La Donna é Mobile."*

## IX

Sir Eric did not object to the proposed inclusion of his niece in the band of performers who were to take part in the *Tableaux Vivants* to be held on behalf of the distressed Armenians.

He had, possibly, doubts as to the extent to which the Armenians would benefit when the final accounts were audited; but, if so, he kept these doubts to himself, and gave his consent to Valerie's appearance with a tolerant smile.

The affair was to be held on a scale of imposing magnitude. Mrs. Graham, whose husband had, so it was said, made a fortune out of rubber, was the lucky possessor of a beautiful old Arab house in an unfashionable quarter—a house which the original owner had sold on the death, in boyhood, of his only son; and unlimited money, and excellent taste on the part of Lila Graham, had transformed the place into a marvel of artistry. This was the chosen *milieu* for the performance; and the great drawing-room, which had formerly been the reception-room of the *harim*, was admirably adapted for the purpose, being of immense size and loftiness, and lighted by innumerable windows, most of which, once filled with priceless meshribyeh work, has been cleverly Europeanised by a famous firm of glass workers. One or two were already occupied by the most delightful stained glass, product of some bygone age; and these, naturally, had been left intact; so that here and there on the wonderful yellow floor there lay great splashes of colour, making beautiful mosaics of rich, dim hues.

Lila Graham was an artist to her finger-tips, and the furniture of the room was as exquisite as its proportions. Aided by her adoring husband, she had ransacked the *bazars*, not of Cairo alone, but of other great Eastern cities, for genuine antiquities, and the result was as perfect as money and a genuine *flair* could make it.

The feature which made the big room so suitable for the purpose to which it was to be devoted was the raised daïs at one end of the chamber. Formerly it had been used as a platform on which the musicians attached to the household entertained the ladies of the *harim;* and, since it was a beautiful piece of work, being made of the same wood as the floor, and, while not too large to break up the proportions of the room, yet of a sufficient dignity to escape the ban of insignificance, Lila Graham had retained it in its entirety, finding it indeed useful for the purpose of bearing the magnificent grand piano which her husband had presented to her on the tenth anniversary of their wedding-day.

This daïs, indeed, was so obviously intended for theatrical purposes, that it had certainly been in the minds of the originators of the scheme for the benefit of the Armenians when the subject of environment had been raised. And since Mrs. Graham was only too charmed to lend her house for the entertainment, all that remained to be done was to settle on the pictures to be presented, and on the people, picturesque and otherwise, who were to be allowed the honour of taking part in them.

To this end a meeting had been called for a date two or three days after Lady Lucia's visit to Valerie; and, since it was felt that to be a success the programme must be varied to suit many tastes, all the performers, and many outsiders as well, were invited to listen to, and if possible aid, the deliberations of the Committee.

M. Lammin, the French artist, readily agreed to act as President of the Council; and at five o'clock on the appointed day, fortified by tea and macaroons, the large party assembled in the great salon, and the proceedings, styled by one irreverent member a symposium, duly began.

The first speech came from Dr. Calantarients, an elderly Armenian gentleman resident in Cairo; and although he spoke briefly, with a commendable lack of exaggeration or emotional appeal, he contrived to bring the cause of his distressed countrymen—at the moment in the throes of a bloody persecution at the hands of the Jews—very strongly before the minds of the majority of his hearers.

After assuring them, in his careful English, of the crying need for monetary help, to which end he understood the entertainment had been projected, he sat down quietly; and after a pause of genuine feeling Mrs. Graham rose to speak.

In a fluent, graphic speech she endorsed all that Dr. Calantarients had said as to the necessity for help; and then proceeded smoothly to discuss the details of the performance which would, it was hoped, provide a certain measure, at least, of assistance.

"M. Lammin has suggested to me that in surroundings such as these, and in consideration of the land in which we are living at present, modern pictures would be something of a *bêtise.*" She looked about with her brilliant eyes, and read approval in the faces around her. "He suggests, therefore, that we should endeavour to confine our efforts to pictures dealing with classical or mediæval subjects, not, of course, excluding pictures of ancient Egyptian life."

She paused to consult a tablet of notes she held, and Max Wynne, who by virtue of his offer to lend any necessary carpets or tapestries was a member of the "symposium," whispered irreverently to Victor that he supposed Countess Chris, who looked like a French drawing, would expect to be cast for Cleopatra.

Victor's eyes twinkled, but he did not reply, and Mrs. Graham sailed serenely on with her speech.

"Presently we shall invite suggestions from the members of the audience as to suitable pictures to be presented. M. Lammin suggests the well-known picture of Nausicaa playing ball with her maidens, and is good enough to offer us a picture of his own representing Atalanta about to start for the celebrated race in which she was defeated by the lure of the golden apples——"

"Atalanta! Miss Rivers, of course!" Romney was unconscious that he had spoken aloud, until an astonished stare from a frigid-looking lady on his left awoke him to the fact; and he hastily coughed and settled his tie in an endeavour to look as though he had not spoken.

When he recovered composure sufficiently to listen to the speaker, he found she was closing her list of suggested pictures with a reference to the well-known "Judgment of Paris"; and then, amid a gentle applause, Mrs. Graham sat down and M. Lammin arose to address the meeting.

The famous French painter was a singularly insignificant figure as he sprang, jerkily, to his feet. Small, thin, with a big head out of proportion to his meagre body, no one would have looked at him twice save for his eyes; and they would have arrested the attention of the most casual passer-by. Large, radiant, of a dark and luminous grey, they were the eyes of a dreamer who yet possessed the almost feverishly enthusiastic activity necessary to translate dreams into achievement.

He was well known throughout Europe as a painter of classical subjects, and everyone knew that for him, at least, the age of beauty had closed, irrevocably, with the decay and fall of Greece.

This fact shone significantly through his opening words.

" As Mrs. Graham has pointed out to you, to present modern pictures, pictures of modern life, garbed in the mode of to-day, would in these wonderful surroundings be little short of an artistic crime. Let those people who must perform in garishly decorated halls and theatres do as they will. For us, privileged to present our efforts in these poetic, nobly formed, tradition-haunted halls, the case is plain. Present only the beauties of the ancient world. Let us lay under tribute not Greece alone, but Rome, Egypt, all of the oldest civilisations of the world."

He paused, his luminous eyes roving over the faces of his audience.

" With this end in view, we must choose our performers carefully. Although it is manifestly impossible to conform, strictly, to type, it should be possible, by the exercise of care, to select players sufficiently close to the ideal which is under consideration."

Again he paused, and one or two of the women among his hearers endeavoured to school their features to what they imagined to be the classical type of beauty required.

" If I may be forgiven personalities "—he smiled, and his English grew a little more broken—" I see before me several ladies who exemplify what I have in mind. For instance " —he had been looking ahead of him, but now his gaze wandered gently to the painted ceiling—" one young lady I see who seems to me to be the very type of the fleet-footed Greek maiden, Atalanta. Again "—for a fraction of a second his luminous eyes rested on his audience—" I see another lady whose beauty is purely classic in form, and to her such parts as Hera, Helen of Troy—all the beautiful women of ancient history seem by nature to belong."

He paused once more; and Countess Chris, looking slightly annoyed, ventured a question.

"But, my dear M. Lammin, you're not going to confine the pictures to beauties only, are you? I assure you, lots of us want to take part, even though we aren't all classically perfect. And don't forget miracles can be effected by 'make-up' and lighting!"

The Frenchman bowed to her, with the slightest hint of mockery in his gallant manner.

"Madame, I am desolated to have given you so wrong an impression. Naturally many of the ladies I see here are willing to help the good cause by displaying their charms. And I assure you, madame, there will be opportunity for all."

"Well, that's all right," said Lady Thirsk, rather sharply. "Now, suppose you tell us a little more about the pictures—let us allot some of the parts. That's right, isn't it, Lila?" She turned to her cousin rather imperatively.

"Quite." Lila Graham sprang up and approached the artist, who was absently scrutinising a list he held. "Now, M. Lammin, what is the first picture on the paper? Atalanta—very well. Here's the sketch of it—we'll set it on the easel for everyone to see."

She deftly placed a large sketch in position, and the audience looked interrogatively at it for several moments. The painting of which it was a representation was the work of M. Lammin himself, and in it Atalanta was represented as a young girl wearing a single white garment looped beneath her beasts by a golden cord. She was guiltless of stockings, but on her feet were light sandals. Her golden hair was tossed back from her brow, and she stood already poised for flight, her whole being expressing a Pagan delight in life, in motion, which was borne out by her lightly parted lips and the upward fling of her head. She was looking straight out of the picture; and behind her, ready also for the swift race, stood Milanion, a splendidly proportioned youth, who held in one hand three golden apples, the lure with which he was to seduce her to defeat. Beside him, apparently giving him a final word of counsel, stood the beautiful Aphrodite, donor of the fatal fruit; and in the face of the latter was a strange mingling of expression—triumph, or so one would have said, over the unconscious Atalanta, yet a strange reluctance to see her own ruse succeed.

The contrast between the youthful runner, the epitome, it seemed, of a joyous girlhood, and the older woman, a thousand times more beautiful, yet lacking something of that very radiance of youth, was strongly marked; and between them Milanion stood, a tall, splendid figure, the type of physical perfection in man as the two women typified two sides of perfect womanhood.

The sketch called forth a very genuine murmur of admiration from the spectators; and the artist smiled in naïve appreciation of the tribute to his skill.

"Now"—Mrs. Graham spoke briskly—"as there are only three figures, I think we might surely get this picture arranged. How shall we do it? Invite suggestions, don't you think, M. Lammin? In that case"—she did not wait for a reply—"suppose someone suggests a suitable Atalanta."

Instantly Victor Romney was on his feet, and, regardless of the glances levelled at him from all sides as the audience craned their necks to look at him, he spoke, courteously, in the direction of the platform.

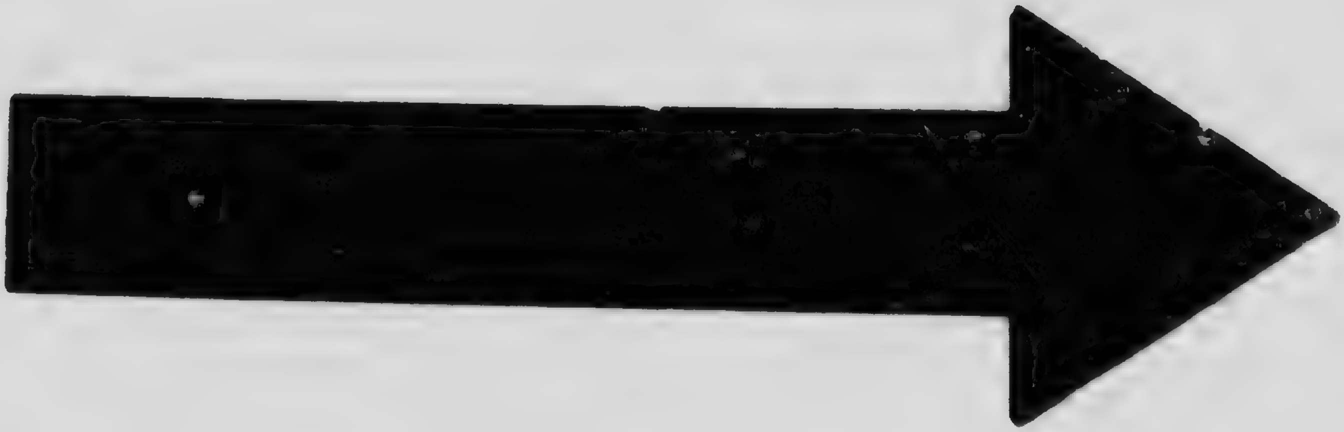
"I beg to nominate Miss Valerie Rivers for the part of Atalanta," he said, and sat down precipitately, while a pair of blue eyes grew dark and stormy beneath their delicate brows and two white hands clenched themselves within a great muff of sable.

M. Lammin bent for a second to whisper an interrogation to his hostess; and, receiving her answer, he turned cordially towards the speaker.

"For my part, I second the nomination heartily," he said gaily. "Miss Rivaires will pardon me if I say that the suggestion was in my own mind when I spoke just now. *Mademoiselle*"—he looked at her kindly—"may we beg you to accept the part for which you are so eminently well-fitted?"

Valerie flushed hotly as many eyes were turned upon her, but she answered bravely. "If you think me suitable, M. Lammin, I shall be very pleased to take the part."

"*C'est bien!*" He clapped his hands softly. "And now—we must find the beautiful Aphrodite. And if I may this



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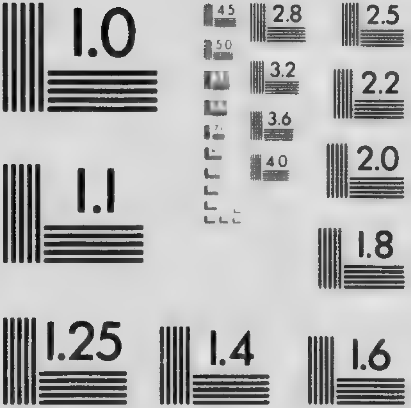

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time be permitted respectfully to nominate the lady, I should suggest that Lady Holland "—he corrected himself hastily—" Lady Lucia Holland be invited to impersonate the lovely Aphrodite."

At this there was a rustle among the ranks of women in front of him, as though every woman whispered to her neighbour; and a murmur of applause was heard, which died away as Lady Lucia composedly accepted the invitation.

" I suppose I have nothing to do but remain as I am posed," she added languidly. " But I'm afraid if any acting is required you will find me quite useless."

" H'm! Rather belittles her own powers of dissimulation, eh? " Wynne, who hated Lucia Holland for the wrong she had done his friend, uttered the whisper savagely. " Now, all that remains is to nominate you for Milanion, and poetic justice will be satisfied."

" I take Milanion? Not much! " Romney's tone was emphatic. " I'm not taking part in this entertainment, my friend! I only came because you dragged me here! "

A second later Countess Chris raised her voice rather mischievously.

" How about Milanion? You want someone tall, don't you, and generally athletic? What about Mr. Romney? He and Miss Rivers were so successful in the tennis tournament, wouldn't it be a good idea to put them together again—as opponents this time? "

Having cast her bombshell, she looked round her, bright-eyed, and subsided into silence, though Lila Graham's half-laughing whisper, " Oh, Chris, you little cat! " brought a smile to her perverse mouth. Almost everyone present understood the situation, and several slyly malicious looks were directed at the subject of it as he sat stolidly by the side of Wynne, who was muttering furiously under his breath.

Valerie, one of the few people in the room who did not comprehend the *double entendre* in Lady Thirsk's suggestion, looked quickly at Victor Romney; and as he caught the rather wondering expression in her brown eyes, he made up his mind with lightning celerity to accept the position into which a malicious woman had forced him.

" If Miss Rivers will accept me as her opponent," he said smilingly, " I shall be happy to take the part of Milanion.

And having seen her fleetness of foot on the tennis court, I can quite well picture her as the invincible Atalanta!"

Whether by accident or design, he had omitted all mention of the third figure in the scene; and beneath their down-dropped lids Lucia Holland's eyes blazed as she realised—and understood—the omission.

M. Lammin, who shared Valerie's ignorance of Countess Chris' malice, beamed joyfully upon the audience.

"Then, *Mesdames et Messieurs, c'est un fait accompli!*" His big eyes shone with pleasure. "With such an Atalanta, an Aphrodite, a Milanion—why, even the bright beings themselves could find no fault with their successors."

"Well, that's settled!" Mrs. Graham made a note in her ivory tablets. "Dresses and so forth can be discussed later. And now we will proceed to the next picture. And for this it has been suggested——"

But what the suggestion had been Victor Romney did not hear. Taking advantage of a slight movement in the audience, as people murmured laughing comments on the arrangement just made, and friends leaned across intervening strangers to whisper to one another, he slipped quietly from his seat, and, followed by the faithful Max, made his way through a conveniently placed door into the great hall without. A moment later, having received hats and coats from the gigantic Nubian attendant, they were outside in the cool dusk which had fallen while they sat in Mrs. Graham's lamp-lit drawing-room.

"Phew!" Romney drew a long breath. "Thank heaven for fresh air and darkness! Wynne, we were mad to have anything to do with this insane project. You see what I have let myself in for, don't you? Yet when she—Miss Rivers—looked at me like that, appealingly, as though she was half afraid I should refuse to appear with her—well, what else could I do?"

"Nothing." Max spoke decisively. "It was deliberate spite on the part of that monkey Countess Chris to put you in such a position, but, once having accepted, I don't see how you can back out!"

"No. It would be too much like a score to her ladyship," said Romney emphatically. "And sooner than let her think I'm afraid of her I would play Romeo to her Juliet if necessary!" He laughed derisively.

"No. I don't think you need be afraid of her." Max spoke ruminatively. "Of course it is always a mistake to underrate an enemy——"

"Hold on a minute, Max." Victor turned to his friend rather sharply. "You're sure, then, that Lady Lucia *is* inimical to me? Don't you think that by now she has buried her enmity—in indifference?"

The street at this juncture was crowded—Europeans hastening home from Government offices, natives *en route* for the cafés where they would sit, cross-legged, smoking keef, or drinking coffee and playing dominoes, for several hours before returning for the evening meal of thin red soup or stewed mutton and rice which is the common fare for three nights out of every four. As Romney asked the last question he was jostled off the pavement by a Turkish soldier who had already drunk more intoxicating liquor than befitted his professed religion; and by the time he had rejoined his friend, after an annoyed growl at the Turk, he found Max ready with his answer.

"No, Victor, I don't think she has. What's more, I don't believe she will ever forgive you. And that's why I sometimes regret asking you to join me in the carpet venture."

"Nonsense, Max!" Having successfully dodged three young Arab students who were walking abreast on the pavement, Victor slipped his arm through his friend's. "Nothing will make me regret accepting your invitation! I love the shop"—he laughed—"and I'm getting quite clever at distinguishing a carpet from Teheran from one made in Brummagem—or wherever they fake 'em! As for Lady Lucia, she can't do me any more harm than she has done already. And if it amuses her to play Aphrodite in our picture—Miss Rivers' and mine—well, let her go ahead, that's all!"

He paused, then broke out enthusiastically.

"I say, though, wasn't it a stroke of genius on my part to nominate that girl for Atalanta! All along she's reminded me of her—sounds involved, but you savvy what I mean? And when I think of her in that white garment, and her hair blowing about her under the fillet thing—why, I can hardly wait patiently for the dress rehearsal!"

To another man in Cairo the vision of Valerie Rivers in the guise of the fleet-footed daughter of Clymene was one which brought a queer spark to his eyes, an accelerated beat to the hardened organ which dwelt in his breast.

For all his unscrupulousness Count Rossi shared with many of his countrymen a very pronounced artistic sense, and the thought of the gold-haired Valerie in the guise of that bygone daughter of the morning was sufficient to thrill that same sense very strongly.

Yet he did not visualise with much satisfaction the complete picture, since the man of whom he was beginning to be suspicious was to be the other central figure therein. Rossi was no fool, and he knew well that Romney was very strongly attracted to Valerie, if, as yet, no more. And since he was beginning to realise that his hastily conceived dream of a conquest of Lady Lucia was but a dream, since she herself still desired Romney, fiercely, for her lover, he was the more determined to prevent Romney speaking of love to Valerie, the girl who was bound to him by fetters she would find difficulty in loosening.

His subtle Latin imagination had been hard at work lately, seeking to turn the present situation to his own advantage; and an idea had recently crossed his mind, whose hold had been strengthened by the proceedings of the afternoon in Lila Graham's beautiful Arab house.

"If she may not be won as a wife, why not as an ally?" So he questioned himself late the same night, as he sat alone in the spacious drawing-room of his villa on the Shubra Road. "A clever woman could do much to help me to win the girl, but—she would require much *bakshish,* so to speak, for her help. And the lovely Donna Lucia has no need of worldly goods. What temptation are diamonds to a woman who possesses pearls of fabulous value—even did one dare to offer them? She is in need of no social help, no worldly advance, such as I might offer a less fortunate ally. Yet her price, for help, would be high, and rightly so——"

He broke off, an expression of triumph on his mobile face.

"*Sapristi!* Paolo Giovanni, your wits grow dull in this lethargic atmosphere! The woman has one unsatisfied desire, one which eats away content, saps vitality, draws tiny lines upon the face which is yet so immeasurably superior to all other faces. Help her to compass that desire, and her aid will be yours!"

He began to pace up and down the room, smoking one thin black cigar after another.

"Yes, that is the plan. It may not be possible to bring the man to her feet, but at least one may prevent him prostrating himself at the feet of another! But how? Surely by ensuring that the place at those swift feet shall belong, by right, to one man alone, the man who by virtue of boldness wins that right!"

He paused long enough to light a fresh cigar, then resumed his eager pacing.

"It should not be difficult. Already matters are in train. The mine is laid, the spark may, presently, be applied. Yet—one must not act prematurely. Once let the bird enter, fully, into the snare, and the work of the fowler is easy. In other words, *amico* Paolo"—he laughed cynically—"once let the girl compromise herself, fatally, with her humble Italian adorer, and the Signor Romney's advance is checked. For if I know Sir Eric Mayne, he would in such a case insist upon his niece entering the safe haven of matrimony, had she not already done so, without loss of time. And then—*vive l'Italia*—and a better understanding between two of the great nations of the world!"

He came to a sudden stop by the grand piano, and stood with one long hand absently fingering the keys, while a slow, subtle smile dawned on the lips beneath the black moustache.

"But—the picture will, after all, be worth seeing—oh, well worth seeing! The juxtaposition of the beautiful and haughty Aphrodite, with the innocent and virginal Atalanta, would alone be worth viewing. But when the would-be lover is introduced—desiring one woman, the desired of the other—then indeed one may render thanks to a beneficent Providence, who is endowed, evidently, with a very charming sense of humour!"

He laughed, and, sitting down to the piano, let his long fingers glide, half-absently, over the ivory keys in an Arabesque of Debussy's which suited the technique and temperament alike of the player to admiration.

## X

Count Paolo Rossi sat up in bed, propped by pillows, drinking his morning chocolate, but in spite of his luxurious surroundings he looked haggard and discontented.

The letters which Emilio, his valet, had brought in on the chocolate tray had doubtless much to do with his attitude; for three of the four had contained requests for money, and the fourth, an epistle from his mother, the Countess Rossi, was not of a nature calculated to soothe its irritable recipient.

The Countess Rossi wrote coldly to the effect that she must entirely repudiate certain debts which had been brought to her notice, the creditors being, it seemed, unable to win any response from the debtor, Count Paolo Rossi, of Cairo, Egypt. Further, she must decline, once and for all, to make her son any allowance from the estate beyond that which was his due; and until he could prove to the satisfaction of his sorrowing family that he was endeavouring, by economy and industry, to win back the position among honourable men which he had forfeited through his own idleness and profligacy, they, the family aforesaid, must regretfully decline to hold any kind of communication with the aforesaid Count Paolo Rossi.

Count Paolo Rossi swore volubly to himself as he read the letter a second time, and when he had come to the last line he flung the sheet onto the floor and swore yet again.

"What in the name of Heaven am I to do?" He asked himself the question angrily. "Money I must have, if I am to go on living at all. And if I must live, I must live as a gentleman, not as a *contadino!*"

He pushed the chocolate tray from him, and meditated long and closely, seeking desperately for a way to retrieve his fortunes before complete disaster overtook him. And as usual the only way to comparative ease and safety appeared to lead through the gate of matrimony, through a marriage with some woman with sufficient money to pay her bridegroom's debts and leave a margin with which he might hope to contract still further obligations.

"After all, it must be the little Valerie." He frowned thoughtfully. "True, her *dot* is only a paltry forty thousand pounds, but still—there is a little spending in forty thousand pounds, and it may even be possible to get hold of the capital. But I must not delay. The Englishman has already half an eye on the girl—or the money. And when an Englishman gets an idea into his thick head, it takes pretty nearly a surgical operation to get it out again."

He smiled sarcastically at his thoughts.

"True, the Lady Lucia will have to be reckoned with before the Englishman may seek a bride elsewhere. And she would, of course, be on my side in a campaign such as I contemplate. It seems odd, truly, that Paolo Rossi should be driven to marry a simple English schoolgirl, but needs must when Satan drives; and, heaven be thanked, Englishwomen are cold and proud, not like our fiery Southern women. One may neglect them, slight them, even be unfaithful to them, and they take it quietly, with none of our women's reproaches, recriminations. I shall be a bad husband, doubtless. But I do not think Valerie will drag my infidelities into the light of day. She will rather eat out her heart in silence"—he smiled cynically—"and solace herself by a stricter attention to her *ménage,* and her children, should heaven crown our marriage with that blessing!"

He laughed, maliciously, at his own word-picture; but a frown chased away laughter immediately, and he lay back on his pillows with knitted brows, realising that the campaign to which he alluded would need much preliminary care and thought if it were to be entirely successful.

He knew well enough that so far from accepting his attentions with any gratification, Valerie Rivers sought, desperately, to evade them, that his attempted caresses were abhorrent to her, and that she no longer found the slightest pleasure in his society. He was shrewd enough to realise that she was very strongly attracted to Victor Romney, and he knew in his secret heart that the thought of the obligation under which he had laid her was repugnant to the girl's proud spirit. And he realised, also, that his hold on her was, in reality, of the flimsiest. Did the truth emerge into the light of day, were it known that in a moment of financial stress he had come to her rescue, although some few might condemn her folly, the majority of people in her world would blame him for offering aid rather than counselling her to apply to her proper guardian.

Sir Eric, certainly, would censure his niece for her acceptance of the offer, but he would understand perfectly that she had acted in innocence, and his real censure would be for the man who had led her to believe in the disinterestedness of his help.

True, the fact that she had gone with him to his Villa at midnight would look at least a little unusual; but even that might be ignored, since no one had seen her there, and if necessary Lady Thirsk could prove that she herself had asked him to lend Miss Rivers his motor-car.

The story was altogether too airy, too unsubstantial to be satisfactory. Did Sir Eric hear of it, he would at once repay the borrowed money, would possibly order his niece to deny having visited the Villa, and her word, backed by her uncle's position, would, probably, be more readily accepted by the world in general than his.

Then, too, Sir Eric would most certainly forbid any further acquaintance between Rossi and his niece; the bubble would be pricked, and, if any reputation were to be damaged, it would probably be his and not that of the girl against whom he had planned.

The only chance of persuading Sir Eric to allow Valerie Rivers to [illegible]—supposing he were unable to win her consent to [illegible] marriage—was by placing the girl in such a position that marriage was inevitable. And since, for all her cleverness, Valerie was still a child at heart, it ought not to be impossible to engineer such a situation.

Long and cleverly did Rossi plan as he lay in bed on that sunny morning; and when at length he arose and called, in a loud tenor voice, to Emilio to prepare his bath, he had a plot already worked out in his head which seemed to promise success.

Yet a chance word heard some hours later was destined to render his preconceived plan futile, and to engender another, which was at once more subtle, more dangerous, and more fascinating than the former one had been.

The rehearsals for the *Tableaux Vivants* had proceeded apace, and although barely a fortnight had passed since their conception, many of the pictures were already in a high state of finish; speaking well, so the delighted promoters declared, for the final performance before the gay world of Cairo.

There were to be a dozen pictures in all; and M. Lammin had so far descended from the lofty pedestal of classicism on which he had at first taken his stand as to allow one or two pictures of mediæval and even pre-Raphaelite times.

Mrs. van Ralton, the wealthy American bridge-player, possessed, in addition to wealth and an accommodating husband, the beautiful and uncommon colouring of countless Rossettian heroines, and M. Lammin had been quick to take advantage of the fact. She was to appear in two pictures, one of the famous Blessed Damozel, who, by a clever arrangement of the Frenchman's, seemed verily to be leaning over the "gold bar of heaven"; the other, Lilith, the witch-wife of Adam. A picture devoted frankly to youth was the celebrated one of Nausicaa playing ball with her maidens; and here Valerie and sundry girl acquaintances, the young daughters of Government officials and other residents in Cairo, made up an enchanting picture of radiant girlhood.

Another, more imposing, representation was that of the Judgment of Paris; and here, again, by an irony of Fate, Romney and Lady Lucia were once more drawn into a juxtaposition which was unwelcome to one, at least, of the performers therein.

The three contestants, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, were represented respectively by Mrs. van Ralton, Miss Bruce, the pretty daughter of a famous explorer then resting in Cairo after a strenuous trip up the White Nile, and Lady Lucia herself. And, needless to say, Lucia Holland was figuring in the rôle of the beautiful—and victorious—Aphrodite.

Much against his will Romney had been forced into the pose of Paris; but, with the exception of the Atalanta picture, he had sternly refused to take any other part in the performance; and, although M. Lammin openly deplored his refusal, alleging that few of the men then in Cairo boasted such a physique, such a natural fitness to appear, Romney stoutly maintained his position.

Valerie had been drawn into taking part in two or three pictures besides the one she preferred to the rest—the picture of Atalanta starting for the last, and fatal, race. She had declined the part of Nausicaa, which had been handed to another girl of her own age; but she appeared as one of the ball-playing maidens; and, at the request of Lady Lucia Holland, who was to appear as Cleopatra, Valerie accepted the part of Charmian, the Egyptian's personal attendant; though she did not realise until too late to draw back that the part of Antony was to be undertaken by Count Paolo Rossi.

The evening of the day which had brought Count Rossi his mother's unwelcome letter had been fixed for a rehearsal of the pictures; and at nine o'clock Valerie entered the great drawing-room of Mrs. Graham's Arab house and looked round her in search of friends and fellow-performers.

"Ah, *Signorina* Valerie, *come sta?*" Rossi's voice spoke softly in her ear. "We are both early, it seems. Shall we sit down and enjoy one of our all too rare *tête-à-tête* conversations?"

There were only a few people in the room, and they made a gay little group in a corner, laughing and chattering with the ease of close personal friendship. In spite of herself, Valerie glanced towards the light-hearted party with an appeal in her glance; but no one was looking towards her, and she was too shy to make her way across the vast empty room to join them.

"Well, *Signorina?*" Rossi's voice held a light mockery. "May we not, at least, seat ourselves? I have been in the saddle most of the day, and I confess I am a trifle weary."

"Yes, let us sit down." Valerie spoke as composedly as she could, though she felt an unaccountable reluctance to enter into conversation with the Italian. "We saw you when we were out riding this morning, and Uncle Eric admired your horse."

"Ah, yes, Garibaldi is a good animal." He spoke casually. "He is perhaps hardly spirited enough for me. I like a fiery animal; but he will carry a lady superbly, and that is what will be required of him by and by."

His bold black eyes pointed unmistakably, the implication which his words contained; and the ready colour flushed the girl's cheek beneath their gaze. For a second she did not know how to answer him, and while she hesitated he spoke for her.

"You are fond of riding, I know. May I hope that one day you will try my brave Garibaldi? I should be glad to know that you approve of him, of his paces, his temper, before deciding, finally, to give him a place in my stables."

Calling desperately upon her courage, the girl looked him in the face; and Rossi smiled, inwardly, as he noticed the effort it cost her to reply.

"It is very kind of you, Count Rossi. But I am sure my uncle would not allow me to ride your horse, in case I should do it any harm. I have not ridden very long, you know."

"Ah, *Signorina,* how unkind!" His eyes laughed, even while he pretended to be abashed. "Do you then think that I would grudge you even my least favourite horse? Nay, did you indeed do him any hurt—which is a wild supposition—he, and I, would still be honoured by your condescension."

"Please don't talk such nonsense," said Valerie, descending swiftly into colloquialism to cloak the real panic which was threatening to overwhelm her. "If I were to let your horse down and break his knees, I expect you would feel anything but honoured. And in any case my uncle would never allow me to accept such a favour from you."

"No?" Glancing round him, Rossi realised that they were still alone, save for the chattering, self-engrossed group at the other end of the room; and when he spoke, his voice and manner alike were different. "But, Valerie—nay, let me call you by your little name—surely you realise that from me, from Rossi, you may accept favours—what you call favours, at least—though you may rightly shrink from taking them from any other man who has not already had the privilege of serving you?"

Quietly the unseen fetters were closing still more tightly about her wrists. In every word of this speech she felt the pull of the chain, and for a second a horrible fear invaded the girl's inmost being. The sly allusion to the obligation under which she lay was unmistakable, and with a throb of the heart Valerie realised that the moment she dreaded was at hand.

And with realisation came courage—the courage, possibly, of the trapped animal which, knowing itself cornered, will fight to the death.

Springing to her feet with a suddenness which took Rossi by surprise, Valerie said lightly:

"Here is Mrs. Graham, at last! I must speak to her about my dress for Charmian—you'll excuse me, won't you, Count Rossi? I shall see you again presently, I dare say."

And before he could recover from his amazement she had left him and was hastening towards Lila Graham, who had just entered the room.

For a second an expression of anger lit Rossi's dense black eyes, and he ground his white teeth together beneath the small moustache. Then with a shrug of the shoulders he accepted the position philosophically, and joined a friend who was moving towards his corner as though in search of him.

Later, Count Rossi was fortunate enough to overhear a scrap of conversation which was not without its bearings on subsequent happenings.

The speakers were Miss Rivers and Victor Romney, and they were sitting in a little alcove made by a large screen of meshribyeh work which had been placed in front of one of the big windows to screen an elderly lady from an imaginary draught.

Two chairs were placed invitingly in a fold of the screen, and there Romney and Valerie were sitting for a brief rest, unconscious of the fact that Count Rossi was standing behind the screen looking out of the great window at the romantic starlit garden below. His position as eavesdropper was quite involuntary, and he had certainly no intention of listening to any private conversation; but it so happened that his own name caught his ear, and, without realising what he was doing, he stood where he was and made no movement to disclose his presence.

"Look here, Miss Rivers." It was Victor who spoke. "Some one told me just now that Count Rossi was looking for you. Have you seen him lately?"

"No." She answered him quietly, though her hands clenched themselves in her lap. "But I don't think it would be anything important. We are not rehearsing the Cleopatra picture to-night, and I am not acting with Count Rossi in any other picture."

"No, and I'm glad of that," said Victor impulsively. "You know one doesn't want to run down a fellow behind his back, but somehow"—he lowered his voice—"I hate to see you talking to him. He—he's all right, I dare say, quite a good chap and all that, but still, I don't think he's the sort of fellow to talk to a young girl like you."

Valerie did not speak, though her eyes were downcast; and presently Romney went on with his speech.

"You don't know him well, do you? I had an idea Sir Eric didn't care much about him. Oh, don't think I'm interfering, will you? You have a perfect right to choose your acquaintances—and friends; but somehow I shouldn't want to see him hanging round a sister of mine."

"But I'm not your sister." Rossi's quick ear noted the half-laughing, half-desperate embarrassment of her tone.

"No—and I'm glad of that!" For a second Romney's manner was unmistakably that of a lover, and behind the screen Rossi swore an odd little Italian oath to himself. "Because if you were, I should not be able——"

So far had he got in his speech when a new voice broke on the listener's ear, and with half-amused incredulity he knew the speaker to be Lady Lucia Holland.

"Here you are, Valerie!" Latterly the beauty's manner towards the girl had been carelessly intimate. "Will you take charge of my pearls again? So many thanks. I can't leave them lying about, and they are dreadfully in the way of the picture we are doing just now."

Judging this to be a fitting moment to leave his place of concealment, Rossi sauntered round the screen and joined the trio as Lady Lucia slipped the rope of pearls over Valerie's golden head. As he had expected, no one noticed from which direction he had come; and as Lady Lucia turned away, Rossi ventured boldly to detain her with a remark on the lustre of her jewels.

"Yes, they are quite nice pearls." Lucia spoke with a shade more animation than usual. "My husband took a good deal of trouble to match them perfectly, and they were very carefully graduated."

She turned away again as M. Lammin was seen approaching in apologetic search of her, and Rossi bent towards Valerie with a smiling request to be allowed to examine the pearls.

Romney had risen as Lady Lucia joined them, and he now stood by, with a rather stern look on his face, as Valerie held up one end of the rope towards the Italian.

"Yes, they are magnificent gems." A light of cupidity flashed, unseen, in Rossi's eyes. "One would suppose Lady Lucia would be almost afraid to wear them constantly as she does."

"Beautiful pearls, yes." Only Romney knew what mental force he was exerting to prevent himself pushing aside the Italian, who still bent over the seated girl. "Valuable, too, of course. But I expect Lady Lucia, for all her apparent carelessness, takes good care of them, all the same."

"Doubtless," agreed Rossi smilingly. "See with what wisdom she chooses out Miss Rivers as the guardian of her treasures!"

"I don't know about that!" Secure in Romney's proximity, Valerie laughed. "When Lady Lucia handed them over to me the other night, I forgot to return them, and gaily went off home in them!"

"No—really?" Victor smiled. "I wonder you could sleep with such a precious thing in your possession!"

"Oh, but I didn't!" She laughed up at him with sparkling eyes. "I told Uncle Eric what I'd done, and he insisted on making a package of the pearls and taking them straight back to Lady Lucia's hotel!"

"I dare say that was safer! You see they are valued at a good many thousands, if report speaks truly——"

"Yes. Who knows if I might not have been tempted to keep them! Or just to slip one or two off the rope—they'd never be missed out of a hundred and twenty!"

"*Signorina!*" Rossi raised hands of mock protest. "Such a scheme is fit for gamblers, perhaps—in order to pay their debts of honour, since I suppose each pearl is worth a considerable sum—*non é vero?*"

With lightning swiftness the gaiety and sparkle died out of Valerie's face, and into her brown eyes flashed a look of terror which was not lost on Romney. Although he did not understand the cause of this sudden collapse of the girl's light-heartedness, he realised that it was something in Rossi's last speech which was responsible for the change, and he resolved to give the matter a little thought later on.

Before Valerie's silence had lasted long enough to become noticeable, Romney answered the Italian's half-questioning supposition.

"Yes. I expect each of the large pearls is worth a good deal. The smaller ones won't be so valuable—though even they are of exceptional lustre."

"*Si, si!*" But Rossi spoke almost absently, as though his interest in the pearls had waned; and after a moment's desultory chat about the pictures, he excused himself politely and left the two together.

A moment later the Judgment of Paris was called for; and, reluctant though he was to take any part therein, Romney was obliged, perforce, to obey the summons of the acting manager.

And, watching the rehearsal of the historic contest for the golden apple, which was to be awarded, finally, to the beautiful Aphrodite, Valerie Rivers felt a sudden pang of some emotion which she was too unsophisticated to recognise as jealousy of another woman.

She did not realise—yet—why it was distasteful to her to see the man who was her friend posing as the lover of the famous beauty; yet when, the picture ended, Lucia Holland stretched out an exquisite hand to the man, and with a slow, subtly alluring smile took from him the fruit, as yet ungilded, which was the symbol of her victory, Valerie felt a sudden desire to get away from everyone, from the lights and colours, the gay, chattering throng, into the darkness and solitude of her own room, where she might try, at least, to understand the nature of this new and most disturbing sensation which had so unexpectedly invaded her hitherto untroubled heart.

But Count Rossi, although he stood and watched the rehearsal amid a group of delighted spectators, saw little of the picture before him.

For a fresh thought had entered his scheming mind, a new idea which seemed to promise a satisfactory conclusion; and behind his impassive face his brain was planning, intriguing, with all the skill, all the delight in devious ways which he had inherited from a long line of ancestors.

"Those pearls—to get hold of them—or half a dozen—three, four of them. Sold safely, secretly, as they could be sold by one who knows, they would bring in useful money. And as the child said truly, who would miss them—from a hundred and twenty?"

A still more subtle idea shot through the nimble brain which might, turned to nobler uses, have won for its owner an honoured place in Italian diplomatic history. Turning away from the chattering crowd around him, Count Rossi left the beautiful Arab house without the formality of bidding *adieu* to anyone. He was suddenly all aflame to be at home, at liberty to search through his papers for an address which at the moment seemed to be of vital importance to him; and although Luigi, the Neapolitan chauffeur let the big car out as they glided through the quiet streets, Rossi's impatience was such that ever and anon he seized the speaking-tube and bade the man hasten yet more.

Arrived at his villa, he sprang from his seat, and without a word to Luigi dashed into the house, as though, said the chauffeur to himself as he backed his car into the garage, *il diavolo* were at his heels. This time Rossi did not enter the great drawing-room in which Valerie had signed the I.O.U., but went instead into his sanctum, a small, book-lined place which held, also, the large American desk at which he wrote his letters and signed his cheques.

"I have it somewhere—but where?" As he spoke, he was searching the pigeon-holes of his desk; and presently his face relaxed, and he pulled out a small, leather-covered book with an expression of satisfaction.

Opening it, he ran quickly through the pages until he found the address of which he was in search; and a light dawned in the bold black eyes, and the lips behind the neat moustache parted in a smile.

"*Ecco!* The very man! To-morrow I go to visit him, and it is odd if I do not hit upon some means of permitting him to handle Lady Lucia's pearls for half an hour! It may be necessary to induce *Signorina* Valerie to honour my house once more with a visit; and this time there must, I think, be witnesses to the visit. And then all will be in order for the Rossi-Rivers alliance!"

Before closing the book he carefully copied out the address he had found on a small sheet of paper, which he then placed in his pocket-book; after which he returned the address-book to its place, and pulled down the top of his desk with the air of a man who has done a good day's work.

"If Stefano Zanoni cannot filch from that string of pearls three—four—half a dozen, replacing them with others of less value, yet of striking similarity in size and lustre, without fear of detection—why, no man living could do so." Rossi smiled again as he turned away from the desk. "To my mind, the thing is done, and since I must move warily in the matter of matrimony, a little ready money will be useful. To say nothing of the other side of the affair—the lever by which I may move events to my will!"

He smiled again, rather cruelly this time; and, sitting down in a large easy chair, lighted one of his favourite thin black cigars, and gave himself up to roseate dreams.

## XI

Two or three days after Rossi's search for the name of his compatriot, Stefano Zanoni, Cairo society—or a section thereof—received an invitation which set tongues wagging gaily.

This was a summons from Lady Lucia Holland to her friends to accompany her into the desert on the next full-moon night, to eat supper at a certain Wady on the way to Sakhara, returning home when the delight of the moonlit desert night should be exhausted.

The plan was for the guests to motor to Mena House, thence to mount on horseback for the ride over the sands, and, needless to say, Lady Lucia's invitations had been limited to those who could ride, and would trust themselves, and their steeds, to the tender mercies of the desert by moonlight.

Lady Thirsk, Mrs. Graham, and Count Rossi were of course among the invited guests, as were Sir Eric Mayne and his niece, and the two partners in the carpet venture.

At first Romney flatly refused to consider the proposition, and only the certainty that Valerie would be invited could induce him to give the matter a second thought.

"I can't go, Max—how can I?" He tossed the note down on the breakfast-table contemptuously. "What—eat that woman's salt after the wrong she did me? How can I—and retain an ounce of self-respect? Apparently she has none, or she would have refrained from inviting me."

"Perhaps this is a sign of a desire to let bygones be bygones. After all, Victor, she hasn't worried you since that day you met her by the Sphinx; and although she's acting with you in the picture show, she has never attempted to trade on your former—acquaintance, has she?"

"No, she's left me alone so far,' returned Romney cynically. "All the same, I don't like it, Max. I don't trust the woman, and that's all about it. She certainly doesn't appear to have any overwhelming desire for my society these days. And God knows she could have pretty nearly all the men in Egypt at her feet if she wanted 'em. And yet—call it conceit, superstition, what you will. Honestly, I don't believe she has finished with me—yet."

"Well, you should know——" began Max doubtfully; but Romney interrupted him rather impatiently.

"Just look how a cat plays with a wretched mouse—for hours at a time. First it catches the poor beast, gives it a nip or two just to show it what to expect, and then it will let the creature go and start running after it in a lazy sort of way, as if it weren't really interested. That's just to make it believe it can escape. But what happens when it starts to run? Why, the cat springs after it, of course, and all the farce begins again. I've seen my young sister's cat do it dozens of times in the garden at home. It'll sit in the middle of the path looking in every direction except the right one, and you really think it has lost its prey—that the poor wretch has escaped, taken cover somehow. But just as you're beginning to congratulate yourself that it's got off, up jumps the cat, marches straight to the place where the mouse is trying to hide, under a bush, probably, brings it out in its mouth again, and sets it off running with an imperative pat of its paw!"

In spite of himself Wynne laughed.

"You're quite graphic, old thing! I'd no idea you knew so much of what that old Nature-study chap at school used to call the feline tribe! "

" I guess I know more about the habits—or the feelings—of the mouse," said Romney rather grimly. " And I feel absolutely certain that the woman's playing the part of the cat—just lulling me into a fancied security so that she can pounce on me eventually! "

" You think she still—— "

" Still wants me? " His voice was harsh. " Nice conceited sort of fool I look, don't I, talking in this strain? But "—he spoke earnestly now—" Max, you know the whole story, and I can be frank with you. Allah alone knows why the woman should have set her soul on making a captive of me, but whether it's caprice, or a deep-rooted desire for revenge on the fool who yet wasn't foolish enough to accept a life-long penance for what wasn't a crime, only a folly——"

He broke off irritably.

" Hang it, I'm getting involved, but you know what I mean. I'm not a coward, as a rule. But there's something in this situation that's getting on my nerves. I'm afraid of that woman, Max, afraid of what she may eventually do. And sooner than fall into her clutches again I'd leave Cairo to-morrow. And if she still wouldn't let me go, upon my soul I think I'd cut my throat! "

For a long minute Max said nothing, though he fidgeted with his coffee cup in a manner foreign to him. Then he said, as casually as he could manage to speak:

" You've never thought of setting up a line of defence, Vic—protecting yourself by . . . well, by introducing a scheme of counter-attack, so to speak—calling another ally to your assistance? "

Victor Romney's blue eyes looked his friend steadily in the face.

" Yes, Max, I have thought of that." He would not pretend to be in ignorance of the other's meaning. " But I'm not sure if it would be wise—yet. To begin with, I'm entirely in the dark as to the state of my—possible—ally's feelings. And I don't want to act in a hurry and perhaps spoil everything. Then—would it be quite—well, playing the game? You see, if I am right, and Lady Lucia hasn't forgiven me for the past, she might easily transfer her vendetta from me to someone else; and—honestly, I daren't risk it. It's too like playing for my own hand at the risk of imperilling someone else's safety."

Max frowned thoughtfully.

"You know, old chap, I'm not at all sure you're not exaggerating, taking a morbid, prejudiced view of things. What harm, after all, could Lady Lucia do, either to you or to anyone else? You know this is the twentieth century, not the Dark Ages; and though I can quite imagine the lady having had recourse to the poisoned bowl or the assassin's dagger had she lived in mediæval times, nowadays one's weapons are limited—and one of hers, at least, has turned out useless."

"Oh, you don't know the woman!" Romney shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. "She is one of those women who would wreck a whole world to get what they wanted; and though I am not quite such a fatuous ass as to think she wants to get hold of me for any purpose other than revenge, well, I'd be a jolly sight more comfortable if there were a continent or two between us."

"Well, we'll refuse the picnic anyway——"

Romney interrupted him impatiently.

"No, I'm hanged if we will! You said once she'd think I was funking her if I didn't go to meet her. And she shan't have that excuse for despising me. After all, if it's bad taste of me to accept, it was her damned bad taste which invited me—and if all the world's going, why, we'll go too and chance it!"

And, springing up from the table, he sought pen and paper and resolutely indited an acceptance of the unwelcome invitation.

The night of Lady Lucia's picnic was one of those exquisite nights of which an Egyptian spring apparently holds the secret. The sky was one vast jewelled dome, and amid the splendour of the heavens the moon hung like a magnificent silver lamp suspended from a chain of stars. The air was soft and alluring, fresh yet balmy, while a gentle, caressing wind blew over the desert sands with a hint of fragrance in its breath, as though in transit it had passed over some perfumed garden of the South.

The desert itself was a symphony of silver and violet, the purple shadows here and there deepening into black; and as they rode across the moonlit sand, even Lady Lucia's guests, worldly, frivolous, irresponsible as many of them doubtless were, were awed into something approaching silence beneath the influence of the eternal solitudes by which they were surrounded.

Somehow it was difficult to talk of the trivialities of life out here in the solemnity of the desert night. Even the most light-minded could not but pay tribute to the weight of tradition and legend which informed this strange land of Egypt. Here history had been made ages since; and although all the actors therein had long been dust, who could doubt the reality of their existence, since their pictures, their written words, above all, their great monuments, still existed, their voices still called down the ages, their thoughts, their beliefs, still influenced the history of all modern civilisations; would continue, surely, to do so until the Great Civilisation should come and the cycle be made complete.

Perhaps of all the party Valerie Rivers was the most susceptible to the magic of the night. She was very young, and youth, even modern youth, is oddly impressionable to outer influences. And to be riding beneath the desert stars on a warm, clear moonlight night of spring was of itself an experience to be treasured by any girl of eighteen. But when other influences were at work, the influences of romance, of dawning love, not unmingled with a fear which out here lost much of its real grimness and took on a tinge of not unpleasant excitement, then no girl of Valerie's temperament could have ridden, phlegmatic, through the night.

Beneath the brim of her riding Panama her eyes looked almost mysterious, so full were they of a mixture of emotions; and Romney, riding beside her, glanced at her once or twice without venturing to speak, lest he rouse her from the happy dream in which she was, apparently, enwrapt.

But suddenly, with a sigh, she seemed to realise that she was not alone, and she turned to her companion with a word of apology for her silence.

"You know this"—she waved her gauntleted hand—"is all so new and so—so extraordinary. I've often read about night in the desert, but I never dreamed it would be like—this."

"Yes, it is rather fine," he agreed quietly. "Those big stars up there, and that fringe of palm trees yonder——"

"And the *silence.*" She sank her voice involuntarily. "To think that these great silent sands have been here for countless ages, that the moon and stars have looked down just like this on a thousand nights—will look down long after we have each of us gone to our own place. . . ."

Her words died away, and she reined in her horse; and, looking at her dreamy, moonlit profile, Romney caught a glimpse of the woman who lay hidden behind the girl's normal light-hearted gaiety.

There was surely thought as well as laughter in those clear brown eyes. The lips which smiled so readily were wise as well as sweet, the outline of the chin promised strength—the whole charming personality belonged to a woman whom one might trust as well as admire, a woman who would use the gift of her womanhood wisely and generously, who would bring to the man she should marry a very treasure of sweet, sound things.

And looking again and yet again at the dreaming girl beside him, Romney told himself that this was the woman he would marry were the Fates propitious, could he but rise above the *débris* of the great disaster which had laid his life in ruins about him.

And at that moment he would have given all he had for the right to offer her an unblemished name, an honour on which lay no shadow of a stain. True, the blemish was undeserved, the stain was not of his making. Yet in this flashing moment Romney sensed the great truth which some men never learn—that a woman's purity, a woman's faith, demand the gift of an untouched honour, a faith equalling that which goes to meet it. And in that moment, too, he realised that, thanks to Lucia Holland, he had lost something he could never replace, that although he had been guiltless of the sin of treachery which the world had attributed to him, he was yet not altogether blameless, in that he had held his honour lightly, and in sheer idle carelessness had allowed his own ideal to suffer indignity.

Even now he felt no real security, had no real guarantee as to Lucia's intentions. And, whatever happened, he was determined that no shadow of that past *débâcle* should rest upon the bright life of the girl beside him.

He must make all safe before he ventured to speak, to make any claim on Valerie's affection; and he was slowly coming to the unwelcome conclusion that he must convince himself of Lucia's inability to molest the girl, by seeking an interview with the woman whom, of all the women in the world, he least desired to meet.

He had been sincere in his remarks to Max Wynne on the subject, and although he was quite unable to make even a guess at Lucia's motives in desiring to entangle him once more in her net, he had an unshakable conviction that she was determined, even yet, to make him her captive.

And with all the force of his being he repelled the idea of being in thrall to her. Lovely though she was, the desired of many, as is the lot of any woman so beautiful as she, the very touch of her hand, the mere glance of her eyes, was enough to turn his blood to ice rather than to fire; and though he was far from contemplating her destruction, he sometimes told himself that he would breathe more freely were she pursuing her activities in some remoter sphere. . . .

A movement from his horse, who resented the halt, brought Romney back to earth abruptly; and at the same moment Valerie appeared to realise the fact that this was not the time for dreaming.

"Just look, we have let everyone get ahead of us!" She turned to him with dancing eyes. "I'm afraid no one will believe in the excellence of your new horse, Mr. Romney! Though I heard you boasting to someone that there wasn't a better animal in Cairo!"

"Nor is there," said Victor firmly. "The old chap I bought him from said so, and though he's not done very much yet, he's a real flyer when he gets going."

"So is my Fatma," she said mischievously. "Let's have a race, shall we? Though I suppose, as Atalanta, I should be more at home on my feet!"

"One second—let me light a cigarette." She waited, smiling, while he fished out his cigarette case. "Yes, I always think of you as Atalanta, you know, and I feel quite sorry you allowed yourself to be tempted by the lure of the golden apples."

"Have we got the apples gilded yet?" She asked the question idly, sitting motionless on her horse, while Victor searched for a match. "It's rather odd they should be wanted in two pictures——"

"Two pictures?"

"Yes—ours and the Judgment of Paris."

"Oh, that beastly thing!" His match had gone out, and he lighted another. "I hate that picture—I wish it could be deleted from the programme."

"Do you?" She looked at him, suddenly thoughtful. "Yet everyone says it will be the success of the evening."

"Possibly." His mouth looked grim. "But I wish it all the same. Or"—he glanced at her, and in the moonlight his eyes looked oddly blue—"I wish there were another Aphrodite to whom to award the golden apple. If *you* were in the picture, Atalanta, I shouldn't have to hesitate in my choice."

The minute he had spoken he cursed his own impetuosity. He had determined to take no chances, to wait to speak until he could do so in safety, and yet, when she sat beside him in the moonlight, her clear eyes looking into his, it was almost unbelievably hard to keep his own unspoken resolve.

In another moment he would have flung caution to the winds; but Valerie herself came, unconsciously, to the rescue, with a touch on her horse's flank which made Fatma start forward, her eager eyes craning towards her distant friends; and as though she realised the necessity for movement, Valerie made no effort to check the advance.

Instead, she turned gaily in her saddle and challenged her companion to a race; and Victor, ignorant of the reason for her sudden gaiety, accepted her challenge thankfully enough.

Neck and neck they raced over the sands; and although Valerie's steed was less skilfully handled than that of Romney, who had ridden since he was a boy, the finish was sufficiently close to prove exciting to the little group of laughing spectators who awaited them by the camping-place.

Romney was the first to arrive, but Valerie came in a good second; and at the sight of her radiant face, with the flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, Lady Lucia told herself that her instinct had been correct when it had whispered to her that there was in this gold-haired girl a potential enemy.

There were several hands outstretched to help Valerie to dismount; but she turned first to Sir Eric, and it was he who lifted her from her horse, and condoled with her, chaffingly, on losing the race.

"Come, come, Val, we're getting accustomed to seeing you victorious!" He alluded to another tennis match in which she and her partner had gained a notable victory. "I can't have you beaten—even by Mr. Romney!"

"Sorry, Uncle!" She slipped her arm through his, and in the moonlight she looked very young and gay. "But I couldn't help it—poor Fatma is quite outclassed by Mr. Romney's Aladdin!"

"Now, good people"—Lady Lucia's voice sounded, lazily, in their ears—"supper is served; and though, personally, I detest eating out of doors, I think you will agree with me that this is an ideal camping-ground."

They were standing on the edge of a little wady or valley, ringed round with rocks, surrounded by palm trees; and since this was not the season for snakes, rugs had been placed on the ground, or on convenient boulders, while one large flat rock served excellently for a table on which to spread the provisions carried thither by Lady Lucia's dragoman and a native servant. At the hostess' invitation the guests filed into the tiny valley, and with much laughter and joking took their seats, and, more serious thoughts forgotten, prepared to enjoy this delightful alfresco entertainment.

Now the silence of the desert night was indeed rudely shattered, as corks popped, plates rattled, and laughter and mirth betokened the reaction which had succeeded the former solemnity. There was indeed something exhilarating in the atmosphere, in the crisp, yet suave air which blew around them; and when, from time to time, the boughs of the tall palm-trees creaked mysteriously, or, far away, a jackal barked faintly, the sounds but added to the lure which the desert night spread over and about the guests of this unusual supper-party.

In the general seating movement Lady Lucia had contrived to keep Victor Romney by her side; and, though he cursed her in his heart, he could do nothing but accept the situation philosophically and endeavour, by his gay and unembarrassed behaviour, to convince her of his own security against her contrivances.

So well did he succeed, that for one wild and passionate moment Lucia was ready to believe that she had taken a great step forward toward her goal. Never since the final rupture had he been so entirely at ease in her presence; never had he looked at her so openly; never had his blue eyes met hers so frankly and fearlessly; and she told herself, a fierce exultation thrilling through all her veins, that for once she had acted wisely in holding her nature in check, in lulling his suspicions to rest by her apparent acquiescence in his decree. For now, surely, she was to reap the harvest of her most unusual wisdom. At least he was no longer resentful, no longer distrustful of her, reading a menace in her every word. She had meant him to believe her harmless, had taken her part in the pictures wherein he, too, figured, with a cheerful casualness which successfully hid the triumph which filled her heart at this juxtaposition; and he had, or so it seemed, taken her at her own valuation, had perhaps come to believe that she had acquiesced, at last, in his decision that henceforth all pretence of aught but the merest acquaintanceship should be dropped between them.

And since it was essential for the success of her plan that he should be thus lulled into a false security, Lucia Holland exerted all her powers of mind and will to persuade him that she had accepted the situation, and that he might relax, for the moment, the state of armed neutrality which was his normal attitude towards her, and simulate, at least, a passing friendship. And so clever was she, so magnificently did she act her part, that for the first time since meeting her in Cairo, Victor found it possible to believe, temporarily, in her good faith. And in the pleasant security of this belief he laughed and jested with his hostess as with the other members of the party, and only Lucia knew what it cost her to smile and chat lightly in reply.

Never, perhaps, had Lucia Holland looked more beautiful than to-night, when she sat on a rock in the middle of the palm-ringed valley in the light of the African moon.

The severity of her riding costume only accentuated the perfection of her figure, and beneath the hat she wore her classic features took on an added beauty of line and tint. Perhaps not one woman in a hundred looks her best in the hat she wears on horseback; yet, lovely as was the shape of her uncovered head, superb the hair which lay in heavy swathes on her low brow, Lucia had never looked handsomer than she did to-night; and the splendid eyes which had, so it was said, lured a hundred victims into her net, had rarely shone so brilliantly, sparkled with so luminous a radiance.

Beside her all the other women paled, sank into insignificance. Countess Chris, who always wore the air of a dainty Fragonard figure, looked incongruous, out of place in the desert; and Lila Graham told herself viciously that while a beauty like Lucia Holland could appear anywhere, in any costume, against any background, without losing any of her charm, it was absurd, after all, to dress in one's hideous, prosaic riding garments on a romantic, star-lit night like this, a hundred miles from anywhere.

Indeed, as the meal progressed, all eyes were directed towards the hostess, whose beauty seemed to increase, uncannily, as the stars grew brighter and the moon shone with a yet more brilliant power in the velvet blue of the sky. Little by little the other women were dropping out of the conversation as Lucia's voice, tuned for the moment to one of its few musical tones, replied to the sallies of her male guests; and even Romney, who feared her, and Sir Eric, who condemned her as an unscrupulous Delilah, were forced to marvel at her loveliness. It was enough merely to watch her, as one might watch a beautiful picture, every movement, every gesture was so full of a subtle enchantment; and as she sat in the midst of the great stones which lay strewn about the sandy ground, in the tiny wady in the Libyan desert, Lucia might well have been taken for the embodiment of all the beauty, all the mystery, all the eternal, indefinable charm which throughout the ages has personified the desire of mankind.

To one man who looked upon her, this gradual growth, this movement towards a veritable apotheosis of exquisite womanhood, was almost unbearable. Never before had Rossi fallen under Lucia Holland's sway; yet to-night the mere sight of her, the nearness of her presence, acted upon him like a fiery goad. It was with difficulty that he made himself look aside from her, made himself speak to the woman beside him; and what she said in reply to his murmured speech he never knew.

Although he had already decided in his own restless mind that Lucia Holland was not for him, to-night her beauty intoxicated him as a draught of heady wine might have done. He wanted, feverishly, to touch her, to put his hand upon her arm, to make her turn the splendour of her eyes upon him;

and he could hardly contain his impatience as the meal went on—interminably, it seemed to him—until cigarettes were lighted, and coffee poured out from countless thermos flasks.

He had no eyes for Valerie, sitting opposite to him, by the side of her uncle; and when, at length, the move was made, he sprang up with an exclamation of relief which brought the eyes of his neighbour to his face with an expression of well-bred astonishment in their depths.

It had been decided that the start should be made in a quarter of an hour, giving time to the servants to pack the remnants of the feast before assisting the company to mount their horses; and by twos and threes the members of the party strolled away over the sand, the women almost feverishly vivacious now that they were no longer dominated by the beauty of their hostess.

Rossi, watching Lucia with his bold black eyes, yet had time to notice that Romney and Valerie Rivers gravitated together by mutual consent, after their temporary separation at the improvised supper-table; and as he turned to Lady Lucia after seeing the two saunter away, he surprised in her eyes a look which almost startled him, so fierce, so desperate it was.

For the moment she stood alone; and Rossi was quick to seize his chance.

"Ah, *Signora,* at last I am fortunate enough to bask for one moment in the light of your eyes!" His flamboyancy in speech was too well known to call forth comment. "May I hope to be privileged to be in your company for even a brief space of time ere the clamorous hordes rush in to drive me out of Paradise?"

Lucia turned to him with a sudden movement which betrayed the tension of her nerves.

"You, Count Rossi? Yes—if my company appeals to you, it is yours for the moment. But—let us get away from here. I am tired of this spot by now."

Moving quickly, she left the wady for the firmer sand without; and as he walked beside her, Rossi noticed she was biting her lip impatiently, while in her eyes a veritable fire of emotion smouldered angrily. And some devil of malice prompted him to feed the fire, to add fuel to the rage which he knew to be burning in her heart.

"Some at least of your guests are also in Paradise." He smiled, waving his hand airily in the direction of Valerie and her companion. "After all, Paradise, even as Purgatory, has many mansions, and those who are not privileged to enter the highest of all sanctuaries, must perforce content themselves with lower heavens."

In the moonlight he saw her eyes blaze, and knew that for once she was off her guard. Yet her tone was careless as she answered him.

"You mean—Mr. Romney is in Paradise? Well, he is not singular in finding Miss Rivers' society delightful." She paused. "Rumour has it that even you, Count Rossi, are not averse to spending an hour in her company."

"Miss Rivers is all that is charming," he said gravely, "and when the moon does not shine, the brightness of the stars is to be wondered at. Yet, let the moon come forth—as she has come to-night"—he looked upwards—"and in her light the most brilliant star pales into insignificance."

For a short space Lucia Holland said nothing, and in the pearly moonlight Rossi's eyes scanned her perfect profile hungrily. Then she turned to him; and again the look he read in her face was sufficient to startle him.

"Count Rossi." Her voice was low. "Why don't you marry Miss Rivers? Surely you have had it in your mind—the idea? Or why have you paid her so much attention? Oh, of course, it is none of my business, but"—she made an effort to speak lightly—"it would surely be a very suitable match."

"Would it?" Even as she lost her self-control, Rossi was losing his. Until to-night he had never realised how lovely she was, had never fallen under the spell of her magic beauty; but now, under the African stars, with the soft wind blowing over his brow, and the vast silence of the sands around him, Rossi felt the tide of passion mounting in his veins, and with a precipitancy very unlike his usual cool, calculating foresight, he spoke rashly.

"Once I thought of the match as suitable, was ready to make Miss Rivers my countess, would she honour me so far. But now—*per Dio, Signora,* now that I have known you, have seen your beauty in the moonlight, I know that for me no star can suffice while the moon still rides high in the heavens above me!"

They were alone in the night. The other guests were strolling towards the horses which were tethered at the further side of the belt of palm-trees, and there was no one within sight or earshot. As Rossi spoke, his voice shaken with genuine passion, Lady Lucia came to a standstill beneath a tall palm, and, looking at him with her luminous eyes, she said quietly :

" Don't you think you are making a mistake, Count Rossi? I am more than pleased to include you as a guest in this little frolic of ours ; but when you speak like this, you must forgive me if I say that you presume upon my hospitality."

" Presume ! " He uttered a fierce word in Italian beneath his breath. " Does the flower presume when it turns towards the sun, the bee when it sucks the honey from the heart of a lily? Oh no, Lady Lucia, it is you who presume, you whose beauty lays violent hands on a man's soul, his heart, until he knows not what he does, what he says. It is you, the eternal enchantress, who presume . . ."

His voice broke, and for a second he turned away. The next second he swung back again, and with a fierce movement caught Lucia in his arms, so that his black eyes stared into her startled blue ones.

" *Madonna*, but you are beautiful ! And is that beauty to be wasted—wasted on an insensate fool who seeks his reward in a girl's eyes—who chooses the star when the moon is his for the asking ! "

" Count Rossi ! " With a wild movement Lucia wrenched herself free and turned upon him with an anger so genuine that even Rossi fell back a step. " How dare you speak like that ! My God ! " Her passion was magnificent in its completeness. " That you should dare—should dare——" Her voice was almost choked with anger, and she was forced to draw a long breath before she could continue. " What is Mr. Romney to me that you speak of him so? Do you think I care if he looks in that girl's eyes to find the love he seeks? What is he to me—to me ! " She reiterated the question fiercely, and suddenly an answering spark awoke in Rossi's breast, and he, too, spoke unadvisedly.

" Rumour has it that he was once your lover, *Signora*, and that yet, for some unknown, but surely powerful reason, he found the strength to break the chains which bound him to your beauty ! "

Now indeed he had goaded her to desperation, and she turned on him a face so convulsed with rage that for a moment she looked like a beautiful fury.

"You say that—you? What—is that what the world says of me, of Lucia Holland! My God, that a man should say that shameful thing to my face. . . ."

For an instant she could say no more. Then, with one of her lightning-swift changes of expression, she turned to him; and now there was something oddly appealing in the lovely eyes.

"Count Rossi—you believe this thing? You believe that a man I had honoured with my friendship grew weary of me—cast me aside as a man casts aside the woman who has become wearisome to him?"

She paused, looking at him as though waiting for his answer; and he wondered, suddenly, if this were the chance to secure the ally he sought in his own campaign.

"Lady Lucia, though you searched the world through, you should not find three men to do what rumour says this man has done. The good God alone knows what was in his mind—perhaps he was alarmed, dazzled by his own fortune, felt himself unworthy to grasp the jewel which was offered him. As only the eagle can bear the full light of the sun, so perhaps he found himself unable to face the rays of so complete a beauty without being blinded by their brilliancy. But presumption such as his deserves, surely, chastisement."

He broke off, looking keenly at her; and for a second her face was alive with haughtiness.

"You mean——"

"*Signora,* pardon me if I speak clumsily, if my words do not convey their rightful meaning! But—it is not surely in your heart to admit this *ingrate* once more into the enchanted realm of your favour?"

She looked at him steadily, and he read strange things in her eyes.

"And if I were to say yes to that question, if I were to tell you that only the hand which wounded my woman's pride can heal the wound, if I were to say that only one victory can wipe out the sting of defeat, would you consider me lacking in a proper spirit, lacking in self-respect, self-esteem. . . ."

As she said the words, Rossi realised, with a great wonder of realisation, that she had still but one end in view—the subjugation of the man who had scorned her. And he answered her gently, with a note of half-chivalrous pity which had hitherto been absent from his tone.

" No, *Signora.* But I can have no conception of a man who could refuse, a second time, the prize which a hundred other men would give their lives to gain."

She sighed heavily, and her face looked strangely soft and wistful in the moonlight.

" Yet if he set no value on the prize . . ."

She checked herself, and when she resumed her voice was hard.

" Surely it is time we rejoined the others, Count Rossi. But "—for an instant the smouldering fires burned in her eyes—" since I have been frank with you, may I ask for frankness in return? You do intend to marry Miss Rivers?"

" If Miss Rivers will accept my hand, it is hers," he said formally. " For since the moon shines only on the favoured Endymion, other mortals must content themselves, it seems, with the stars."

She did not pretend to misunderstand him; but she spoke calmly in reply.

" Unless you hasten, you may find even the stars out of your reach."

" I think not." His tone held a peculiar significance which her quick ear noted gladly. " And perhaps the moment is nearer than I had thought."

" Yes." She looked away over the desert, and again her eyes were full of strange fires. " And when you have won your prize, come to me, and I will give you my congratulations."

Her tone was as significant as his had been, and he realised that here was the ally of whom he had dreamed before a madder, more fantastic idea had taken possession of his brain.

Well, since Lucia Holland was not for him, it behoved him to make sure of Valerie, and he had already decided how that security was to be achieved.

If his plot succeeded, and he did not see how it could fail, the bird was safely caught in the net. Flutter within its meshes as she might, she would not be able to extricate herself, and marriage would be the only way of escape.

But money must be had, and at once. And this necessity, too, had been provided for.

A sudden connection of ideas made him glance quickly at his companion.

"You do not wear your precious pearls when you ride in the desert, Lady Lucia?" He spoke lightly, as though desirous of returning to safe conversational grounds, and she responded in the same tone.

"No. I very seldom leave them at home, but a riding-habit and pearls don't amalgamate, so on these occasions Coralie, my maid, has charge of them."

"I hear Miss Rivers carried them away with her one night recently," he said laughingly, and she smiled carelessly as she replied:

"Yes. I had quite a bad quarter of an hour before Sir Eric returned them to me, wondering if Valerie would lose them on the way home."

"So many stories are woven around valuable pearl necklaces," he said. "Even the virtue of friends has not always been proof against the temptation to appropriate them, if report speaks truly."

Her smile now was faintly contemptuous.

"Surely you do not suggest that Miss Rivers would succumb to such a temptation?"

"*Ma, Signora!*" He appeared shocked at the bare suggestion, made as it were in jest. "Miss Rivers is your friend—and she is a young lady of the highest integrity. Besides—what should Miss Rivers want with money? She is not a man, she has no debts of honour, no gambling debts——"

"She is reputed to be a fine bridge-player," said Lucia carelessly. "I wonder her uncle allows her to play for money at her age, but I suppose he pays her losses, so she has nothing to worry about."

"Quite so." Rossi laughed casually. "So that, as you say, Miss Rivers is not likely to succumb to the temptation even of your famous pearls!"

A moment later they had rejoined the rest of the party, and after a good deal of laughter and jesting the cavalcade remounted and rode off again over the silvered sands in the direction of Cairo.

Manœuvre as he might, Romney could not now constitute himself Valerie's escort, and he was obliged to act as cavalier to Lady Thirsk, whose eyes sparkled with malicious amusement as she watched Valerie ride off between her uncle and Mr. Graham.

But, alleging a sudden fit of sulks on the part of his beautiful Arab mare, Count Rossi rode alone for the greater part of the homeward way. And his thoughts were busy as he rode, for before his mental vision floated the picture of an Italian, a small, lithe man with black eyes set in a parchment-like face. An Italian with fine brown hands, whose delicate finger-tips had all the dexterity of the artist, the craftsman.

And as Rossi visualised him during that ride over the desert in the white moonlight, he seemed to see him bending carefully, lovingly, over a rope of exquisite pearls, fingering them with a deftness which showed at once the expert and the lover of the beautiful, lustrous things.

And in his vision it seemed to Rossi that the man who handled them smiled as he did so. And his smile was surely one of triumph, the exultant, satisfied smile of the man who has achieved a wonderful thing.

And as he rode along Rossi too smiled, for he saw a notable victory within his grasp at last.

## XII

Sir Eric Mayne looked across the breakfast table at his pretty niece, and in his face there was an expression of anxiety which presently found relief in speech.

"Anything wrong, Val? You look worried—as my old nurse used to say, as if you'd lost a shilling and found sixpence!"

Valerie paled at this attack; and when she spoke her voice was a little unsteady.

"No, there's nothing wrong, Uncle Eric. I"—she sought desperately for an excuse—"you know I was late home last night—or rather, this morning."

"Yes. I don't think I approve of these late nights, Val. A girl of your age wants plenty of sleep. I shall be glad when these pictures are done with."

"So shall I." Her tone was fervent, and again her uncle glanced at her in surprise.

"Why, Val, I thought you were keen on the show. Tired of rehearsing, or what?"

"No, I'm not a bit tired of it, really." She seemed oddly anxious to remove the impression she had made. "I like the pictures—some of them—immensely."

"Everyone tells me you make a satisfactory Atalanta," remarked Sir Eric, watching her closely the while. "It's to be one of the hits of the evening, isn't it? Of course, young Romney makes a fine Milanion, and Lady Lucia is an ideal Aphrodite."

"Yes." But she sighed as she spoke; and Sir Eric's mind reverted to its former anxiety.

"Valerie, what's the matter? You're pale, and your eyes are heavy. Doesn't Cairo suit you? If you're not well here I shall have to send you home to England. I daresay Aunt Laura would be glad to have you again, and Eastbourne is quite a nice place, I believe."

"Oh, no, Uncle Eric!" She spoke impetuously. "Don't send me away! I couldn't bear Eastbourne after this heavenly place, and Aunt Laura and I never got on very well during the holidays I spent with her."

"That's all very well," said Sir Eric, and he still looked dissatisfied as he observed her from the other side of the table. "But there is no doubt you are not looking well, and I shall have to give Mrs. Graham a hint that the rehearsals must stop in decent time."

A flood of crimson surged into Valerie's pale face; and an expression of something not unlike panic filled her eyes.

"Oh, no, uncle." The words were jerked out of her almost against her will. "Don't do that. You see it was only ten o'clock last night. Nearly everyone went then, but they made me stay on for—for a game of bridge."

Sir Eric put down his coffee cup and looked keenly at his niece.

"So *that's* the reason of these white cheeks, is it?" His tone was a little grim. "You know, Val, I don't think that's playing the game. You are quite aware of the fact that I don't like you playing cards so frequently. I was glad for you to appear in these pictures because they are a much more suitable form of amusement for a girl of your age."

He paused; but Valerie's eyes were fixed on her plate; and after a second's hesitation he continued in a slightly less austere tone.

"I quite appreciate that it is hard for you to refuse when Mrs. Graham, or any other woman older than yourself asks you to play; but knowing my feeling in the matter, I think everyone would realise quickly that in refusing you are acting out of deference to my opinion; and no one would dream of censuring you for taking a firm stand."

Still Valerie said nothing, nor did she raise her eyes from the tablecloth; and Sir Eric went on speaking, in a colder tone than he usually employed with his niece.

"I don't want to have to forbid you to play cards at all, Valerie. You are very young, but still you are old enough to choose for yourself in matters of this kind; and I can only suggest that in future you do not play so frequently. You play for money, I suppose?"

She looked up; and her brown eyes wore an expression he did not understand.

"Yes, generally. But the stakes aren't high, as a rule. And I am usually lucky."

"Well, that's a good thing," said Sir Eric rather drily, getting up from the table as he spoke. "Of course, if you like to pay away your allowance on bridge debts you are at liberty to do so. But surely a young girl like you can find a better use for her money."

He waited for her to reply; but Valerie only murmured an inarticulate word; and after a second he proceeded, in a tone of finality which she quite understood signified real displeasure.

"We will say no more about it, Valerie. You know my wishes; and it is entirely your own choice as to whether you regard them or not. But I hope I did not make a serious mistake when I allowed you to join me here. Perhaps Cairo is not the place for a young girl; but I fancied you were sufficiently level-headed to stand the experiment."

Still Valerie said nothing, only traced with her finger a design on the white cloth before her; and with a slight shrug of his shoulders Sir Eric opened the door and passed through it, leaving her alone to ponder over his words at her leisure.

But when the door had closed behind him, a long, slow shudder passed over Valerie; and resting her elbows on the table, she propped her chin in her hands and stared before her with an expression of miserable bewilderment in her face.

"What am I to do? If Uncle Eric knew—everything, what would he say—or do?"

She sat on at the deserted table in a veritable trance of wretchedness, while remorse, fear, regret, filled her mind to the exclusion of all else.

In retrospect she went over the happenings of the previous night—that night which had opened so propitiously, and had closed, for her, so disastrously.

She had felt light-hearted to an uncommon degree as they rehearsed the pictures in Mrs. Graham's drawing-room; and all the performers, feeling their efforts would certainly be crowned with success, had been equally gay. The evening had passed in a flash, amid much laughter and complimentary badinage; and soon after ten o'clock Valerie, her own part finished, sought her hostess in order to take her leave.

She found Mrs. Graham in a small room used, sometimes, as a green room, but on the present occasion deserted in favour of a larger apartment. Lila Graham was bending over a table, scribbling something on the back of a sketch, M. Lammin standing beside her, dictating some note of instruction; and as Valerie approached she looked up rather impatiently.

"I'm not quite ready," she began; then, as she saw who it was standing before her, her tone changed. "You, Valerie? Well, what is it? Anything wrong with your Greek garments?" They had been trying the effect of some of the dresses to-night.

"No, they're lovely," said Valerie, smiling; and as he looked at her M. Lammin told himself that this slim, flushed, bright-eyed girl was indeed the ideal Atalanta. "But I've rehearsed all my pictures, and I think I had better go home."

For a moment Mrs. Graham hesitated, balancing her pencil on her finger thoughtfully. Then she said:

"Don't hurry away, Valerie. We're going to have a game of bridge presently, ' I promised Alan he should have you for a partner."

Valerie had tried, shyly, to excuse herself, alleging her uncle's dislike of late hours; but Mrs. Graham had overborne all protests, with a smiling insistence before whose importunity the girl was helpless.

She had accordingly remained, reluctantly enough; and though, the game once started, the old fascination soon had her in its grip, she was sufficiently ill at ease to play distractedly, with the result that at the end of the evening she found herself in debt to the extent of something between four and five pounds.

This in itself was not serious, her creditor being Lady Thirsk, who laughingly disclaimed any desire for payment—a disclaimer which made the girl's face burn—yet it was sufficiently disquieting when she remembered that her allowance was not due for more than a week, and that to ask for it before the proper date would be to bring all kinds of uncomfortable inquiries from the donor thereof.

The really disconcerting circumstance came later, however, when she was on the point of leaving. Had she left earlier, it had been arranged that the pretty girl who played Nausicaa should take her home in the car which was to be sent for her; but now, when Valerie came to leave in earnest she realised, rather unhappily, that she must apparently go alone, since Mrs. Graham, occupied with her other guests, had no intention of providing her with an escort.

But she had hardly realised this uncomfortable fact before she found Rossi by her elbow. He had also remained to play cards, and to her dismay she found that he was now, naturally enough, offering to see her safely home through the deserted streets.

Plainly there was nothing else to be done, so Valerie accepted the offer as graciously as she could; and a minute later the two were in the quiet road outside the beautifully worked gates which guarded the old Arab house.

Nothing was further from Valerie's thoughts than to speak of her losses at the bridge table; but to her dismay she found that Rossi was already cognisant of her ill-luck; and when she recovered her composure she was horrified to find that he was offering, gently, to come to the rescue did she feel the repayment of the sum to be inconvenient at this juncture.

"Oh, no!" In her haste she was brusque; but Rossi smiled quietly to himself at her uncompromising negative. "You are very good, Count Rossi, but I couldn't dream of it. Lady Thirsk will wait a few days until I can pay her; and in any case I am already too much indebted to you."

"No, *cara!*" They were walking along a secluded street of many shuttered windows and closed doors; and the sound of their footsteps was loud in the stillness. "You are not too much in my debt. You could not be so, for if a lover may not help his beloved——"

He heard her horrified gasp; and again the lips beneath the black moustache widened in a smile. But he went on speaking calmly.

"When, presently, we are married, *cara* Valerie, these little affairs will automatically settle themselves. I have not much money, alas! to bestow upon my bride, but I have one of the most honoured names in Italy to offer her, and my Villa is a pleasant place, set among vineyards and olive-groves, looking over the blue waters of the Mediterranean. . . ."

"But——" She stopped him so imperatively that involuntarily he listened to her. "I don't know what you mean. I—I'm not going to be married—I'm not going to marry—*you!*"

With her heart a-quiver with a girl's first delicate love, with her senses steeped in the glamour of romance, with all her soul thrilling at the thought of the look in Victor Romney's blue eyes as they had rested upon her in her Greek dress to-night, Rossi's words came like a blow from a cruel hammer; and she reeled, mentally, beneath his confident declaration. This it was which gave her tone its edge; and the unconscious cruelty which breathed in the last word, as though the idea of union with him were inconceivable, stung Rossi to fresh assertion of his claims.

"But, Valerie"—his pronunciation of her name was deliberate—"I think I do not understand. Have you not realised that all these weeks I have looked upon you, thought of you as my betrothed?" The foreign word startled her. "Surely in England a young girl does not accept money from any man save him whom she intends to honour with her hand?"

Even as he spoke the crudity of his own words offended his æsthetic sensibilities; but he was assured that this was the moment to rivet the fetters still more closely; and although he shot a sidelong glance at his companion as they walked, it was curiosity, not apprehension, which informed that glance.

"But, Count Rossi." In her dismay she turned to him almost appealingly. "I can't marry you—I couldn't! Why, I don't love you—and my uncle would never allow me to even if I wanted to!"

"I think, signorina, if I may be permitted to say so, you err a little there." He spoke smoothly, and her heart sank at the confident note in his voice. "Did Sir Eric know of the circumstances in which I was happy enough to become your banker, did he realise my part in the affair, understand the—misapprehension"—he stressed the word—"under which I suffered when you were good enough to accept my poor assistance, I fancy Sir Eric, as a man of the world, would realise that my—shall we say, hopes?—were not, in the circumstances, unjustifiable."

"You mean—my uncle would say I was to marry you?" She spoke bluntly, too much aghast to call *finesse* to her aid.

"But—*carissima*"—he spread his hands with the little gesture peculiar to him—"do not, I pray you, speak of the affair as though it were a tragedy! If indeed I have been mistaken, if you looked upon me merely as a machine turning out bank notes at your charming behest, I have indeed been in error! But—you will forgive me?—in my country a transaction such as ours could carry with it but one meaning; and no other man, I venture to say, would look favourably upon a lady who refused to accept the position which she had herself engineered—for her own advantage——"

He sank his voice on the last words; and though she had missed the darker significance of his speech, she realised one fact all too plainly—the fact of his determination to use that unlucky debt as a lever to break down her resistance.

Valerie was barely eighteen—a mere schoolgirl where the world and its methods were concerned; and she was by no means sure how she stood in relation to this man who had lent her money.

She saw plainly enough that he was taking advantage of her folly; and she realised that to act thus was opposed to all the standards of men like her uncle, and—and Mr. Romney. Yet she supposed that he had a certain right on his side. She *had* taken money, a large sum, from him; and although in her ignorance she had imagined him to be lending it out of pure good nature, and on a business footing, she was obliged to admit that the mere acceptance of it had put her, to a certain extent, in the power of her creditor. That a gentleman would have scorned to make capital out of her credulity she felt instinctively; but for all Count Rossi's birth, his possessions, his name, she understood quite beyond the power of any misunderstanding that he intended to exact from her the uttermost farthing of her debt; and—this was the thought which drove the blood from her heart—*not in money alone*. . . .

Yet as she sat, on the following morning, going over the dreadful scene, she felt again that it would be impossible to marry Paolo Rossi. Whatever he had had of fascination for her had long since vanished; and she could no longer even understand her first liking for him.

It was inconceivable, now, that she should ever have accepted money from him. And her whole soul was bent on a wild desire to be able to pay back the sum she owed him. She felt, irrationally perhaps, but very strongly, that if she could free herself from his debt, could get back into her possession the fatal paper she had signed, she might be able to release herself from the unwritten obligation on which he harped so continuously. But to pay him back was impossible; unless—and the mere fact that she could dream of the alternative showed the measure of the girl's desperation—unless she went to her uncle, and, telling him the whole story, begged him to help her out of the position into which her own crass folly had led her.

He would pay the money, of course; that she knew well enough. But what would he think of her, what opinion would he hold of the girl who could act in so rash, so—she boggled at the word, but it would recur—so deceitful a fashion? She had led him to understand that she was well able to pay any debts contracted at cards from her ample allowance; and she had appeared to acquiesce in his decree that she should have little to do with the Italian, while all the time her I.O.U. for a considerable sum of money lay in his desk in his Villa on the Shubra Road.

And her visit to the Villa—how explain that? For by this time Valerie knew well enough that should that visit become public property, only one interpretation would be put upon it by the laughing, whispering, slandering world of Cairo. And the bare idea of such publicity made her writhe with shame. . . .

Even as Valerie sat, huddled up in her misery, over the breakfast table in her uncle's flat, Rossi, too, was thinking over the situation; and his thoughts, to judge by his frowning looks, were not altogether of a triumphant nature.

Valerie had been relieved to find that Rossi did not, apparently, propose an immediate marriage, although he insisted that she should look upon him as her future husband, and hinted, significantly, that friendship with any other man might lead to the open assertion of his rights over her. And she had wondered, in the midst of all her fears, why he did not endeavour to hasten matters.

In truth Rossi himself was rather at a loss how to proceed. Being a Catholic, marriage to him was not the plain and easily performed ceremony which to a man of another religion it might have been; and the fact that Valerie was under age, to say nothing of the difference in creed between them, was in the nature of a stumbling block. He had of course determined that the marriage should be valid, should leave no loophole for a later annulment of the ceremony; and yet to go openly to Sir Eric and demand the hand of his niece would certainly lead to a flat refusal. True, the display of his trump card, and Sir Eric's probable dread of a scandal, might lead the latter to consent to the affair, particularly if Valerie did as Rossi bade her, and, the fear of public scorn hanging over her, added her entreaties to those of her suitor. But the whole matter was far from simple; and although Rossi was only too eager to get the thing settled, to make Valerie—and her fortune—his own, he saw the wisdom of delay.

Sometimes he told himself, half-laughingly, that he would abduct the girl, carry her off to Port Said in his motor-car, put her on board a vessel bound for Naples, and, once in Italy, marry her, willy-nilly. But there were difficulties in the way of so bold a stroke; and though he told himself that once she realised that she was fatally compromised she would give in without more ado, he did not dare to take so grave a risk.

But there was plenty of time. Sir Eric would not leave Egypt until the heat of summer drove him forth; and by that time something might have occurred to make things easier. In the meantime he must get the girl still more completely in his power; and another visit to the Villa might be necessary. And then, too, there was the question of the pearls. . . .

When he reached this point in his meditations the frown cleared from Count Rossi's forehead, and a smile chased away the gloom from his olive face.

"To-day I must visit friend Zanoni." He sprang up and began pacing the great room with the graceful, stealthy tread peculiar to him. "It is time the affair was inaugurated; and with a little luck it need not take long."

And after smoking one of his favourite black cigars he called to Emilio to fetch his hat and stick, and entered his waiting motor-car with a smile on his lips.

But Valerie sat on, lost in her own bitter thoughts, until the Arab servant entered to clear the breakfast table. And even then she went no farther than the drawing-room, where, crouched among the cushions on the couch, she spent the rest of the bright spring morning in a veritable nightmare of dread and apprehension.

Sir Eric was late for lunch; and when he did come in he was preoccupied to a degree which precluded much conversation; so that the meal passed almost in silence. After his rebuke of the morning Valerie could not summon up courage to remind her uncle that it was Band afternoon at the Club. It seemed that he had forgotten this function, or, alternatively, did not intend to take her there as usual; and when he left the table, reminding her rather coldly as he went that he was dining out, Valerie realised disconsolately that she was still in disgrace.

She spent a long, lonely afternoon and evening; and when bed-time came she crept into bed, thankful that the heavy day was over. But Valerie was an honest person; and in the depths of her heart she knew that her uncle's censure was not unjustified. She *had* known of his dislike for cards; and she had, also, realised that the rehearsals for the tableaux had formed a convenient cloak for one or two impromptu bridge parties. So that Sir Eric was quite justified in feeling displeased with her; but his displeasure seemed almost the last straw; and she cried quietly to herself in bed, wondering rather miserably how she was to free herself from this load of apprehensive disturbance which weighed so heavily on her mind.

It chanced that Sir Eric entering cautiously, so that he should not disturb his niece, caught the sound of a sob issuing from Valerie's room; and since he had reproached himself during the afternoon for his coldness to her at lunch time, he pushed her door gently open, and standing on the threshold asked quietly:

"Are you awake, Val?"

Instantly all sound ceased; and he had an impression that she gathered herself together, tensely, in the darkness; but as he repeated the question her voice came faintly towards him across the gloom.

"Yes, Uncle Eric. Do you—do you want anything?"

"Only to say good-night to you, little girl." He moved forward, guided by a ray of light from the lamp which burned in the hall, and sat down on the edge of her bed. "I'm afraid I scolded you rather hard this morning, eh, Val? But you had been a naughty girl, hadn't you?"

"Yes, oh yes. You are quite—quite right." She sat up in bed, her two gold braids hanging over her shoulders, her brown eyes very wide and tearful, and held the mosquito net aside. "But please don't be cross with me, Uncle Eric! I—I'm so unhappy!"

"Unhappy?" He was startled for a moment, before he realised that exaggeration comes naturally to youth. "There's no need for unhappiness, Val. Why, what's the matter? Surely you didn't mind me talking to you this morning?"

"N—no. But I hate you to be cross with me, and—and to leave me at home. . . ."

"So that's it!" He spoke briskly. "You guessed why I didn't take you to the Club to-day, eh? Well, you deserved a little punishment, didn't you? But that's over now. Once a fault has been punished, it's forgotten, and we'll say no more about it. But I want you to understand, Valerie, that I strongly disapprove of you playing cards for money. As you see for yourself, it leads to deceit, and from that—however, it's all finished now. And to cheer you up I'll tell you something nice."

She turned to him, and now that his eyes were accustomed to the dimness he saw that there was a pensive little smile in her eyes.

"I've got a surprise for you, Valerie, something to show you. It—or they—arrived this afternoon; but I didn't feel inclined to let you see them then. But if you'll go to sleep now, like a good girl, I'll show you them after breakfast to-morrow."

"It—them? Uncle Eric, what is it—or they? How mysterious you are!"

"It's something very pretty," he told her gaily. "But I shan't tell you anything more now. It's shockingly late, and I don't want to see pale cheeks in the morning."

He bent down to kiss her as he spoke; and rather to his surprise she flung her two arms round his neck and hugged him with a kind of desperation which, naturally, conveyed no meaning to him.

"There, there, little girl, don't strangle me!" He spoke in muffled tones, one of her honey-coloured braids of hair crushed against his mouth. "Yes, I'll kiss you again—there—and now you must really let me go."

"Uncle Eric"—she had released him, but yet clung to one arm with both hands as though she feared he would leave her—"you are still fond of me, aren't you? You—you'd stand by me, wouldn't you, always—whatever I did?"

For a second the intensity of her manner disturbed Sir Eric. There was something odd, something almost—tragic was the absurd word which rose in his mind—about her voice, the grip of her hands. She spoke as though she were in deadly earnest, as though the matter were one of the deepest import; and yet—she was only a child, living a sheltered, happy life which no hint of tragedy could touch.

With an effort he shook off the uncomfortable impression, told himself she was overwrought, hysterical; and his tone was intentionally bracing as he replied, releasing himself from her clasp:

"Of course I am still fond of you, Val! You ridiculous child, what do you mean by such questions? And of course I'd always stand by you, though I won't promise to pay your gambling debts!"

He laughed as he spoke the last words; and, rising, did not notice the pallor which spread over her face as she heard. She did not reply, and he patted the bedclothes kindly.

"Now I'm off to bed, Val, so good-night. Pull your net round you—that's right—and don't worry any more, but go to sleep, and remember I'm going to show you something pretty in the morning."

She said good-night quietly, in a subdued voice; and for a second Sir Eric felt oddly dissatisfied. Then, telling himself he was a fanciful old fool to take any notice of a girl's fit of nerves, he repeated his own good-night briskly and left her to seek repose.

But sleep did not visit Valerie that night. Only with the new day, as the first pearly light of morning spread over the sky, and the rosy fingers of the dawn touched the minarets of the city till they glowed like enchanted spears rising into the pale blue heaven above, did Valerie's brown eyes close in slumber; and even then her lips parted now and again in a little sob.

For Valerie was in the grip of fear. And those who have known what it is to be afraid, know well how grisly a bedfellow is that same unseen spirit of fear.

## XIII

On the following morning, true to his promise, Sir Eric bade Valerie accompany him to his sanctum; and once there he closed the door with a smiling air of mystery which could not fail to intrigue the girl's curiosity.

"We must keep out intruders," he said gaily, "because I'm going to show you something pretty and not without value. So we don't want any one prying round at present."

"But what is it, Uncle Eric?" In spite of herself Valerie was growing a little excited, and a tinge of rose came into her pale cheeks as Sir Eric lifted down from an inner shelf of his cupboard a large leather case and one or two smaller ones.

"Wait a bit and you shall see." He drew a chair to the table and sat down. "These are your mother's jewels, Valerie, which I have had sent out from England—or rather, brought out by a friend who came on the last P. and O. boat."

"My mother's jewels? But I didn't know she had any!"

"No, because they have been kept, to the present, by your father's sister, Mrs. Goldsmith—your Aunt Gwyneth. We thought you were too young to have them yourself, and she simply locked the things up with her own. But as you know, she is going out to California to stay with her son—your cousin—and is sending all her own valuables to the bank. She asked what she should do with these things, and as there are not many, and nothing, so far as I remember, is particularly valuable, I said I would take care of them for you henceforth."

"But who brought them here?"

"Mr. Herrick—the Irrigation man you've heard me speak of. He came out on the *Moldavia*, and knowing him well, your aunt asked him to bring them with him, which he kindly did. I only got them yesterday, so I've not had time to do more than glance at them."

"Oh, Uncle Eric, do let me look!" There was no doubt about Valerie's interest by this time, and her eyes shone brightly.

"Oh, Val, you women are all alike!" Sir Eric smiled. "Big and little, young and old, the very idea of jewellery excites you! Well, here goes; but mind, I'm not going to give them to you to wear just yet."

He opened the larger box, which was in reality an old-fashioned jewel-case, and from it he took out various trinkets—a pair of sapphire earrings, a diamond brooch in the form of a swallow, a crescent of rubies and diamonds, and a delightfully girlish-looking pearl necklace with a tiny diamond clasp. Laying these carefully down on the table Sir Eric next extracted a couple of gold bracelets, a sapphire pendant, and various inexpensive but beautifully designed French and Indian ornaments. Half a dozen rings, set with different stones, among them a half hoop of diamonds, and a couple of jewelled chains completed the collection; and as Valerie gazed on them she wondered for the hundredth time about the young mother who had worn these jewels before her death, which took place when Valerie was barely seven years old.

She knew that the elder Valerie had been Sir Eric's favourite sister—a fact which accounted for his affection for herself; and as she gazed at the jewels she seemed to visualise the pretty, fair-haired mother who, until the fatal day when she was widowed, had been so light-hearted, so gay, had sung to her little one, romped with her as though she were in reality only a child herself.

Sir Eric's thoughts, too, had wandered back to the days when his sister was alive, and he sighed as he reverently handled the trinkets.

"It was a thousand pities you didn't know your mother, Valerie." He spoke rather abruptly. "Oh, I know you can remember her—vaguely; but it is now, when you are becoming a woman yourself, that you want your mother beside you. A man is never much of a hand at bringing up a pretty young girl."

"Oh, don't say that, Uncle Eric!" She laid her hand on his arm. "You're the best and dearest uncle in the world, and though of course I'd simply adore to have a mother like other girls, I'm sure no one but you would be half so good to me, half so patient when I'm stupid—or tiresome."

"Well, well!" Sir Eric took off his eyeglasses and laid them on the table beside the little heap of jewels. "I've not shown you everything yet. This"—he laid his hand on a small case—"contains your mother's engagement ring; and it is a remarkably fine emerald."

He opened the case as he spoke and displayed the ring which sparkled within on its bed of white satin. It was a gold circlet set with one emerald, surrounded by tiny diamonds; and the stone was a fine one, of a deep, lucent green which glowed with a mysterious fire, as though a flame lay at its heart.

Even Valerie's unaccustomed eyes could see that the ring was unique; and as she gazed at it, fascinated by its extraordinary beauty, she heard Sir Eric say:

"You like it, Val? Well, it is a beautiful thing, and although I told my sister that green was an unlucky colour to choose, I don't wonder she disregarded my advice when she saw this ring."

"Is green unlucky?" Gently, almost shyly, Valerie took the lovely ring out of its white bed and turned it about in her fingers so that the sun caught the gem and broke up its sparkle into a hundred prismatic flashes.

"Well, your poor mother must have thought so, sometimes." Valerie's father had been drowned while yachting with a party of friends, on the sixth anniversary of his wedding day. "Of course, it is nonsense to believe her choice of ring could have any influence on her life—but no one could say she had the luck she was entitled to."

He watched Valerie slip the ring over her own slim finger, and his fine face was pensive as he recalled the girl to whom it had originally belonged; but presently, pulling himself together with an effort, he turned to the other trinkets.

"Well, Val, we'll put them to bed again now that you have seen them. They aren't suitable for you to wear, I'm afraid; do you think so?"

"No, I suppose not," said Valerie rather reluctantly, taking up the sapphire pendant as she spoke. "But I'd simply love to have something—to keep, not to wear," she added hastily. "You know I have nothing of my mother's at all."

"Haven't you? I didn't realise that, Val." Sir Eric looked thoughtfully at the jewellery. "You'd like something, of course. Well, what about the pearls? Really, it is a very pretty, girlish-looking little string, and I don't see why you shouldn't have it and wear it now and again if you like. I remember giving it to poor Valerie for her first dance, and how pleased she was with it, to be sure!"

He picked up the necklace as he spoke and put it in a little box which had held a bracelet.

"There you are, Val. After all, though I'd be sorry if you were to lose it, it isn't of any great value. Now if any one took a fancy to this"—he slipped the emerald ring over his own brown finger—"they would get a good haul."

"Why, is it so valuable?"

"It cost about three hundred and fifty pounds, I believe," returned Sir Eric thoughtfully. "Of course, if it came to selling, one might not realise the price; but it would certainly fetch a very decent sum."

As he spoke the telephone bell in the hall rang sharply; and bidding his niece return the jewels to their cases Sir Eric moved to the door and went out hastily to answer the imperative summons.

But Valerie, left alone, stood holding the wonderful emerald ring in her hand, while a flood of thoughts surged, tumultuously, through her brain.

If this ring were sold, it would fetch a decent sum. If—the corollary was inevitable—if she sold the ring she could pay Rossi the money she owed him; and—the sequence was followed to the logical conclusion—the ring belonged to her by right, and if she chose to sell it no one could raise any objection.

But—her breath came fast—would Uncle Eric let her have the ring? And even if he did allow her to take it, what would he say did he know the use to which she intended to put it? Legally it might belong to her, as the daughter of the first owner, but it was a valuable ring, and perhaps ought to remain in the family.

As she stood there, a picture of indecision, with parted lips and dilated eyes, Sir Eric returned to the study, and she slowly put the ring back in its case and waited for him to speak.

"An invitation for us both to dine at Helouan to-night with the Herricks," he said. "You'll like that, Val. They have that pretty little Villa you admired when we were over there—you remember the one, behind a high white wall covered with purple bougainvillea."

"Oh, Uncle Eric, I can't go." She spoke ruefully.

"Why not?"

"There's a dress rehearsal to-night, and I'm afraid I must be there."

"That's a bore." Sir Eric frowned. "They specially want us to-night because that man Long, who wrote that interesting book on the Rosetta Stone, is to be there, and they know I should like to meet him."

"I'm sorry, Uncle Eric——"

"Well, it can't be helped. I'll 'phone through and let them know I shall come alone. But I would have liked to have you with me."

"Shall I put these back, uncle?" She was fingering the jewels.

"Yes, and I'll lock them up safely. Don't forget your pearls, or shall I keep them for you?"

"Oh, I can take care of them," she said quickly. "You know that little cupboard in the wall of my room is as good as a safe, and I always hide the key carefully." She paused, the emerald ring in her hand. "I suppose you wouldn't let me keep this too? It—you say it was my mother's engagement ring, and I would like——" But she could not go on. The words seemed to stick in her throat.

Sir Eric looked at her, his fine face softer than usual. After all, he was saying to himself, the child had a right to her mother's jewels, and some girls would have felt aggrieved that out of them all she was only allowed a string of pearls. Of course, she was very young, and the ring was valuable; but as she had said, the cupboard was a safe place, and if she liked to take out the ring, now and then, and look at it, well, he was inclined to let her have her way.

The servants were honest—his own valet and personal servant a model of integrity; and since no one knew of the jewels they were probably safe enough.

"Well, if you have set your heart on the ring, take it, Val. But you will be careful of it, won't you? Don't leave it lying about, or someone will take a fancy to it. After all"—he hesitated—"perhaps you'd better let me keep it. You shall have it later on, but at present——"

"Please let me keep it, Uncle Eric." She looked at him appealingly, her brown eyes very like the eyes of another girl called Valerie; and after a moment's indecision Sir Eric agreed.

"Very well. But now run and lock them both up. You can wear the pearls now and again in the evening, you know; but of course the ring is much too valuable for a young girl." Sir Eric was a trifle old-fashioned in his ideas at times.

"Yes. I shall not want to wear the ring." Valerie's lips were cold; and she wondered whether her voice betrayed her inward agitation. But apparently Sir Eric noticed nothing, for he put away the remaining jewels with his usual methodical precision, and then sat down to his desk and dismissed her kindly.

Safely shut into her own room Valerie sat before her dressing-table and examined the ring attentively. It was, as she realised well enough, both beautiful and unique, and she could easily believe that it was worth a considerable sum of money. But—to Valerie's inexperience the proposition seemed hedged about with difficulty—how did one set about converting a thing of this kind into hard cash? And—even supposing one were able to overcome the first almost insuperable obstacles, had one any right to sell the ring, even though its sale meant release from a bondage so horrible, so galling, that sometimes even death itself seemed preferable?

For Valerie had come to believe that if she could pay her financial debt to Count Rossi she would be in a position to free herself from any further obligation. So long as she owed him money, so long was she in his power; and almost insensibly Rossi's determination to marry her had begun to influence her own views, until she was ready to believe that by hook or by crook he would one day make her his wife, and would carry her off, helpless, to the Villa in Italy of which he had spoken to her.

But—if she could only get out of his debt! If she could repay the loan he had made her, if she could stand before him free and unshackled by any clogging obligation, then surely he would have to let her go, would be forced to relinquish his claim upon her, and to allow her to resume her own existence apart from any compulsory intimacy with him.

Yesterday she had despaired because she could see no way in which to acquire the money she needed. She owed Rossi seventy-five pounds, and with all her pinching and scraping she had only managed to save a paltry four pounds out of her allowance. And—a new thought flashed into her worried brain—she owed Lady Thirsk five pounds which *must* be paid.

And here in her hand was the means of escape, the jewelled key which should open the prison gates behind which she languished, setting her free to re-enter the joyous, innocent world from which she felt herself, now, to be debarred.

That Sir Eric would disapprove of her action she knew quite well. But in the light of Rossi's smiling threats even Sir Eric's anger took on a dimmer, less alarming hue; and she felt instinctively that no price would be too high to pay to feel herself liberated from Rossi's fettering claims.

Yet even now, with a last minute instinct of sanity, she wondered whether it would not be wiser to go to her uncle and lay the facts of the case before him. And yet, so curious is the psychology of youth, so baffling the working of an immature mind, that she felt an uneasy qualm at the bare idea, lest—though she did not formulate the words to herself, the fear was in her mind all the same—lest Sir Eric should say that she was bound by her own precipitancy, should consider she had in reality given Count Rossi cause to expect that she would marry him, and that she had no option but to fulfil the promise she had given him, tacitly, but none the less bindingly, when she accepted his monetary help so easily.

And if Uncle Eric saw no course open to her but marriage with Count Rossi, her fate was sealed. But if—and here pleaded the optimism of youth—if she could by her own action free herself, then she did not believe the Italian would attempt to force his views on Sir Eric, and she might once more feel it good to be alive—alive and unhampered by any dark and sinister secret.

And thus it happened that at the end of an hour's deliberation Valerie made up her mind, as she believed quite calmly, to sell her mother's ring. She would not ask more for it than the sum she really needed; and surely if she represented to the buyer that she was loth to part with it he would give her time to buy it back again, some day in the future, even at an increased fee.

She wished now that she had asked for something of less value, both intrinsically and, so to speak, sentimentally; but it was too late for regret; and even if the pearls had been of similar value she would not have dared to part with them, lest Sir Eric should one day bid her wear the necklace.

Possibly few girls of eighteen find themselves in a position similar to this in which Valerie was placed, and possibly few girls would have possessed the wisdom to extricate themselves without harm. Any woman of the world would have advised Valerie to go to her uncle without delay, and there is no doubt that would have been immeasurably the wiser course.

But for all its precious, its incomparable gifts, youth lacks the balance which comes with experience; and so Valerie proceeded to attempt the impossible—to try to remedy one stupendous folly with another of far more crushing magnitude.

Oddly enough, after the first confusion of mind had subsided, she knew how to set about her uncongenial task.

The dressmaker who had made her Greek robes, whom, by the way, she had promised to visit to-day to talk over a slight alteration in the garments, had her *atelier* or show-room on the floor above a jeweller's shop; and in the window of the latter there was a notice in French and English to the effect that antique jewels were bought or taken in exchange. The emerald ring was not, of course, an antiquity, but Valerie had heard it said that the elderly jeweller, a Frenchman called Poiret, was, besides being a seller of trinkets, an artist in jewels; and she felt sure that he would admire the ring sufficiently to agree to buy it. True, she intended to stipulate that he should not sell it again until a reasonable time had elapsed; but she remembered that Countess Chris, who had had dealings with him, had spoken of him as a courteous, obliging man of business; and although Valerie shrank from the idea of offering her mother's ring, she felt glad that if it were to be sold at all it was to go into the keeping of such a man as M. Poiret was reputed to be.

And—somewhere in her being there lay a streak of mysticism—Valerie could not rid herself of the idea that could her mother have known of the straits in which her young daughter found herself, she would have been glad to know that it was her own engagement ring—the symbol of love—which should set her child free from the spectre of a dreaded marriage.

When her thoughts had reached this conclusion Valerie rose from her seat with a pale, set face, and slipping the ring off her finger laid it carefully back in its white satin bed; after which she began, with a haste unlike her usual dainty deliberation, to dress for a small luncheon party at which she was due within the hour.

Once dressed, she did not linger for the last finishing touches which a pretty girl does not as a rule despise; but locking the pearls away in the cupboard in the wall and slipping the case containing the ring into the little suède bag she carried, she left the room, and indeed the flat, as though she had not a moment to spare.

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## XIV

FORTUNE, which sometimes favours the unworthy as well as the brave, led Count Paolo Rossi to enter the street in which M. Poiret's shop was situated about four o'clock on the same afternoon, and thus it was that the Italian was witness of a little comedy which was to prove of inestimable benefit to the man who saw it played.

While he was yet at some distance from M. Poiret's premises, an *arabeah* came rattling down the street, and with many wild cries the driver pulled up his two miserable little horses outside the door of the building in which the jeweller and the Greek dressmaker conducted their respective businesses. A girl sprang from the ramshackle carriage as it pulled up, and the onlooker had time to recognise Valerie Rivers before she vanished into the narrow passage-way from which the jeweller's shop opened.

It so happened that Count Rossi, while well aware of the existence of M. Poiret, with whom, when in funds, he had had sundry dealings, was in ignorance of the dressmaker's establishment above; and naturally his first thought of Valerie was in connection with the jeweller, which was unfortunate for Valerie; for had Rossi known of Madame Leonides' dressmaking business he would probably have concluded that it was the Greek whom Valerie was about to visit, and would have passed on his way without paying a second thought to the occurrence.

As it was, however, Rossi's curiosity was intrigued. What business could Miss Rivers be about to transact with M. Poiret? The shop was a reputable one, of course, and many of the winter residents in Cairo knew it well; but M. Poiret's wares were expensive, and it did not seem very probable that a girl in Valerie's position would be making purchases there, unless, of course, she were acting on her uncle's behalf.

In any case Count Paolo Rossi was sufficiently interested to think it worth while to saunter past M. Poiret's shop a few minutes later; and though he did not find it expedient to linger before the window, his black eyes were quick enough to catch a glimpse of Valerie's blue hat as she stood before the counter in conversation with the courteous Frenchman, who was apparently examining something which he held in his hand.

A few minutes later Rossi returned slowly, and a quick glance assured him that the shop was now empty of customers—a circumstance which slightly surprised him, owing to the fact that Valerie's *arabeah* was still standing in front of the building, as though waiting for her to emerge once more.

This time Rossi ventured to stand for a minute before the window and, having proved to his satisfaction that Valerie was not in the shop, he came to the natural conclusion that Miss Rivers had business of some other nature in the building, which accounted for her absence.

Having assimilated this knowledge Count Rossi quickly made up his mind what course to pursue in order to gratify the curiosity which he acknowledged burned within him; and sauntering across the road he entered a small, unpretentious café and ordered a cup of coffee from the obsequious Arab waiter who hastened to serve so important a patron.

Here, sitting well back from the pavement under the shadow of the awning, Rossi sipped his coffee and smoked a leisurely cigarette, secure in the knowledge that, himself unseen, he could keep a vigilant eye on the building opposite until such time as Miss Rivers should emerge and set him free to satisfy his curiosity by discreet inquiries.

Half an hour passed before she appeared, and Rossi was growing tired of his surroundings, which did not suit his notions of comfort; but at length Valerie came out of the doorway and entered the waiting cab, which immediately whirled away with the usual accompaniment of frantic cries from the coachman and an instant scattering of the itinerant throng in the roadway.

No sooner had the carriage disappeared than Rossi rose from his seat, paid for his coffee and, after pausing to light a cigarette, sauntered languidly across the street and entered the jeweller's shop.

M. Poiret and an attendant were standing behind the counter conversing in low tones, but as the Italian entered M. Poiret politely moved forward and stood waiting his customer's greeting.

"Ah, M. Poiret, *come sta?*" Rossi spoke genially, and the Frenchman, who loved to be considered a linguist, bowed delightedly.

"*Va bene, va bene, signore!*" He beamed gaily on his visitor, and after a few more sentences had been exchanged in Italian Rossi slid gently into the language in which M. Poiret could be at his ease.

"Well, M. Poiret, and how is business? Have you bought any beautiful old things cheap lately?"

He had asked the question idly enough, meaning to bring the conversation round to the subject of the other occupants of the building by degrees; but to his surprise M. Poiret looked at him with a sly twinkle which betokened an interesting revelation to come.

First, however, M. Poiret spoke to his assistant, giving him a rapid, low-voiced order; after which he turned to his customer with a mysterious smile.

"*M. le Comte,* if you will do me the honour of entering my little room behind the shop I will show you the last beautiful thing I have acquired. You permit?"

"Certainly." Rossi moved instantly towards the inner door, and a second later M. Poiret was holding open that door and imploring *M. le Comte* to have the goodness to pass through it.

Rather amused by the air of mystery with which the good Poiret was investing this very ordinary proceeding, Rossi entered the small room where the jeweller's private business was transacted, and threw himself into a chair which stood invitingly near the little round table in the centre of the room.

"Well, Poiret?" He had taken out his cigar-case and was extracting from it one of his favourite black cigars. "And what treasure have you unearthed? But I forget—you like my cigars. Help yourself, *amico mio!*"

He held out the case, and the jeweller solemnly extracted a cigar, uttering his ceremonious thanks the while. But although he eyed its thin blackness eagerly, he did not attempt to light it, laying it down on the table and preparing to show his visitor the trinket with which he was obviously hoping to surprise him.

From the recess of an inner pocket he carefully drew forth a small leather case, which he opened, displaying within the lid the name of a well-known English jeweller. The case was lined with white satin, and in it reposed a magnificent emerald [illegible] the ring which Cedric Rivers had given nearly twenty [illegible] ago to Valerie Mayne, as a visible symbol of the love [illegible] to them was a very real and precious thing.

"*Sapristi!* But that is a marvellous thing, *mon ami!*" As yet Rossi did not connect the ring with Valerie, but his innate love for beauty bade him stoop to look more closely at the green fire which sparkled up at him from its satin-bed. "It is surely a flawless stone, and—I may examine it? It is well set—well and suitably set, by an artist in settings, *non é vero?*"

"*Mais oui, M. le Comte.*" But although the Count's enthusiasm was infectious, M. Poiret's assent was a trifle uncertain

Rossi's quick ear caught the note of doubt in the other's voice, and he looked up swiftly.

"Well, M. Poiret, what is wrong? The ring belongs to you? It is for sale?"

"*Quant ça, M'sieu, je ne sais quoi dire!*" M. Poiret looked cautiously round him as though to satisfy himself of their privacy; but after a second glance he went on speaking in a lower tone. "The ring was sold to me this afternoon, barely an hour ago. Yet—I do not know if I am at liberty to sell it or no."

"That sounds interesting." Rossi's brain was at work. "But at present your explanation is like the hieroglyphics on the Rosetta Stone, unintelligible save to the initiated. Tell me a little more, my good Poiret, so that I may understand the position."

"That is exactly what I am unable to do myself, *M. le Comte.*" Poiret looked round him again; then, obeying a gesture from Rossi, drew up a chair and sat down by the table. "The fact is, that ring was sold to me, for a fraction of its value, *voyez-vous,* by a young lady who begged me not to inquire her name, nor to make the transaction public, merely assuring me on her word of honour that the jewel belonged to her, and that she had the right to dispose of it in her own hands."

"Ah!" The exclamation escaped Rossi almost unconsciously, but M. Poiret took it for a sign of disapproval and hastened to justify his action.

"But, *M. le Comte, figurez-vous, moi, je connais bien cette jeune fille!*" He waved eloquent hands "Although Mam'selle had no idea of it, I have seen her often with her guardian, a gentleman well-known in Cairo society."

"Well? Surely in that case there was no difficulty in the matter? You did not, I suppose, suspect the lady of having come by the ring dishonestly?"

"No, no, M'sieu! But—it is a valuable ring, and for a young girl, belonging, as one may say, to the nobility, a young girl who has doubtless much pocket-money, to enter my shop in order to dispose privately of a ring of such value——"

He paused, evidently much perplexed; and Rossi, whose subtle brain had already evolved the beginnings of a scheme, came carelessly to the rescue.

"*Mon cher* Poiret, let me be frank with you. An hour ago I myself saw a certain young lady enter your shop; and by the way"—he broke off suddenly, genuinely anxious to discover where Valerie had gone after leaving Poiret—"who else carries on business in this building? I had imagined all above were flats."

"*Non M'sieu,* on the floor above is the *atelier* of Madame Leonides, the dressmaker. And it was to see this woman that Mademoiselle went after leaving me this afternoon."

"I see. Well, to resume. I know the young lady who sold you this ring, Poiret, and although it is a delicate matter"—he coughed and pretended to be slightly embarrassed—"I think I could almost hazard a guess as to the reason for its sale."

"You could, M'sieu?"

"I think so." He spoke gravely. "I think also I could account for the lady's desire for secrecy, since it would doubtless cause her—guardian—some annoyance to know of the sale of this valuable ring."

He paused, judicially; and the other wondered, rather uneasily, if he were likely to regret having transacted business with the young lady.

"You and I, my good Poiret," proceeded Rossi smoothly after that impressive pause, "are men of the world. And it is understood that young ladies of good family do find themselves, sometimes, in need of a little more money than those in authority over them consider suitable. Dressmakers' bills, bridge debts"—he laid the faintest stress on the last words—"oh, there are several ways in which a young girl may outrun even a liberal allowance. And if I were to make a guess I should suggest that this ring was offered to you for—well, something under a hundred pounds?"

M. Poiret's round eyes stared wonderingly at his visitor, whose powers of divination seemed to him to be strikingly acute.

"*M. le Comte*"—he spoke earnestly—"I perceive that you know more of the affair than I myself. But it is as you say. The lady asked for this beautiful and precious ring a sum between seventy and eighty pounds; and as I am an honest man I hesitated to take advantage of her ignorance of the value of the emerald."

"Your hesitation was not long lived," hinted Rossi delicately; and the jeweller's genial countenance darkened slightly.

"M'sieu, I am not a philanthropist," he said with a stiffening of his manner which did not escape the Italian's notice. "Had not the lady appeared so anxious, so determined to sell the jewel, I would have endeavoured to persuade her to reconsider her decision. *Mais—que voulez-vous?* She first asked, then entreated me to purchase the ring for the sum she had fixed; and sooner than allow her to go to some, possibly, less *honest* tradesman"—he accented the word rather resentfully—"I decided to buy the ring at Mademoiselle's own price."

"You offered her more?"

"I offered her one hundred pounds," said Poiret with a note of quiet triumph in his voice. "But, rather, I confess it, to my surprise she refused anything more than the sum she had originally asked. And so, to cut the matter short, I gave her the money, and the ring became my property, for the time."

He had succeeded in astonishing Rossi by the last words.

"For the time, M. Poiret? But——"

"As I say, M'sieu, for the time. For when the lady had signed the receipt for the money, she asked me, with a hint of embarrassment in her manner, if I proposed selling the ring again immediately."

"And you replied——"

"I replied that a ring of this description might possibly remain unsold for a long time, owing to its value. And Mademoiselle then proceeded to ask, with the same hint of *gêne,* if it would be possible for me to put the ring aside for a month or two, without offering it for sale, so that she might, if she desired to repurchase the trinket, be able to do so."

"Oh! So the lady wished, if possible, to buy it again?"

"*Oui, M'sieu.* And for me, I have a good guess as to the reason. The ring, I feel assured, is a family affair; and it struck me that perhaps—a temporary embarrassment—a merely temporary disappearance of a jewel which then reappears, before questions can be asked . . . you follow me, *M. le Comte?*"

"Perfectly, M. Poiret." While the Frenchman spoke Rossi had been forming a plan; and he now proceeded to unfold it in the nature of a suggestion. "Before we go further, M. Poiret, it will be better for me to be frank with you. I know the lady—well. I am acquainted also with her uncle, and am what one may call an intimate friend of the house." He guessed shrewdly that Poiret would believe him. "And I happen to know that Mademoiselle has been a little uneasy over a debt of honour—a bridge debt, *bien entendu!* which perhaps *M. l'Oncle* might not regard very —shall we say, very leniently! I myself should have been honoured—but the lady is of an independence! Well, the long and short of the matter is, this ring was sold, I think, to pay that debt; and possibly its loss, for good, might be serious. Now, M. Poiret, let me make a proposition to you. Should you decide to sell the ring, will you permit me to be the purchaser? As I have told you, I know the lady well" —he laid a slight stress on the word—"and her interests will be safe in my hands. In any case, can I prevail upon you to wait for a few weeks at least—to give Mademoiselle the opportunity to regain her ring? And lest you should feel unable to consider with equanimity the tying up, so to speak, of the money given for it, I shall be happy to pay for my option of purchase by way of compensation."

"*Mais non, mais non, M. le Comte!*" M. Poiret's sentimental French heart scented a romance, and not for worlds would he have shattered it. "The ring is safe with me—I will wait weeks, months, if necessary, and no one shall see the beautiful emerald, though I myself may feast my eyes on it from time to time."

"Thanks, *mon vieux!*" Rossi again handed his open cigar-case to the gratified jeweller, who took a second cigar and laid it down beside the first. "Then we may consider the affair finished? And in the meantime—silence! You comprehend?"

"*A la mort, M. le Comte,*" replied Poiret with a smile; and Rossi, deeming the affair satisfactorily concluded, lost no time in taking an amicable leave of the worthy Frenchman.

But as he returned to the Savoy Hotel to pick up his waiting car Rossi's thoughts were busy, and all the way home he sat in deep meditation. There was much in the affair he did not understand. The sum asked for the ring coincided too nearly with the amount of Valerie's debt to him to be an insignificant factor of the case; but why this sudden determination to repay the money, and what courage had nerved the girl to take this method of procuring the money? For he never doubted Valerie's intention to pay the debt; and it did not suit his plans that she should free herself immediately from the obligation under which he had laid her.

For he knew very well that with his hold over her relaxed, if not broken altogether, all his carefully-laid plans would be jeopardised, and he had no wish to lose everything at this eleventh hour.

For another plan had almost come to maturity, a plan in which Lady Lucia's famous pearls were involved; and to ensure the success of that second plan it was necessary that Valerie should still stand in the relation of debtor to him.

He divined with his natural acuteness that Valerie would take the first opportunity of paying her debt to him, and the opportunity would surely come that night at the dress rehearsal of the *Tableaux Vivants*—a rehearsal at which they were both due. But he could not risk meeting her yet, before his own counter-plot had materialised; and he resolved that he would not put in an appearance at Mrs. Graham's Arab house that night.

"Yet I had better see her to-night, perhaps." He clenched his white teeth rather savagely. "I must get in my stroke first, and unless it is done at once the whole structure I have so carefully built will collapse like a house of cards. But"—his black eyes gleamed suddenly—"if I could persuade her to come to the Villa for the I.O.U.—she will be only too pleased to have it in her own hands once more, and it should not be difficult to make her believe it is necessary she should regain possession of it——"

He broke off, frowning thoughtfully.

"Of course it is a thousand to one chance that she will again forget Lady Lucia's pearls. Yet, if luck should be with me, she might well leave with them still round her neck. And in any case it will be well to have Zanoni at hand. Yes. The moment has come, and at least I can try. But there are arrangements to be made, and the affair grows more complicated. Besides"—he bit his lip—"did I not invite some friends to take supper with me on my return from Cairo to-night? It will be necessary to postpone their visit; but no, *per Dio!*" He stopped in his hasty walk so abruptly that an elderly Levantine who was passing by uttered a startled exclamation. "It may be as well to have witnesses—and in that case I will let matters take their course!"

Once inside the car he directed the man to drive at the utmost possible speed; and when with a flourish Luigi drew up at the steps of the Villa, Rossi sprang out with a haste unlike his usual languid nonchalance. For a moment he stood hesitating; then, turning to the chauffeur, gave him some careful orders, which at his peremptory command the man repeated after him.

Satisfied, Rossi nodded his head once or twice, then with a casual word of dismissal he ran up the steps and disappeared into the Villa, still with that air of unusual haste which this afternoon characterised all his movements.

And the Neapolitan chauffeur, waiting until his master had vanished, shrugged his shoulders and permitted himself the luxury of a knowing smile, which, had it been witnessed by that same master, would have earned him a fiery reprimand at the least.

But Rossi was busily engaged at the telephone; and when, after a strenuous quarter of an hour he had concluded his business, he turned away with a smile of triumph which boded ill for the girl against whom it was directed.

And in a tiny, shadowy shop in one of the most mysterious streets of all the mystery-laden city, another man smiled to himself—a small, lithe man with dark eyes and long, delicate fingers, dark eyes which sparkled at the thought of beholding a certain famous string of pearls, fingers which twitched with eagerness to handle the beautiful things, to do his patron's bidding so cleverly, with such exquisite dexterity, such deft precision that none should know, save by mischance, that they had ever passed through those sensitive fingers.

Rossi's plan with regard to the pearls had been well laid. Yet there was in it one fatal flaw which even his ingenuity could not foresee; and this one error, based on a miscalculation, might well lead, sooner or later, to detection.

## XV

The Dress Rehearsal for the pictures which took place that evening would have been counted successful had it not been for the absence of one of the principal performers

Without a word of excuse or apology Count Paolo Rossi apparently pursued his avocations elsewhere, and the pictures in which he figured were thereby shorn of much of their glamour, since the costumes worn were the property of the wearers, and no one cared to appropriate the Italian's garments without his permission.

Lady Lucia, as Cleopatra, was one of the performers who found Rossi's absence tiresome, for without him the picture naturally became unmeaning ; and although Charmian, in the person of Miss Rivers, had no desire to complain, others were less lenient.

Yet, although Valerie was relieved that she need not act with him, she too was aware of a measure of disappointment when his non-appearance became an accomplished fact. For in the little bag she carried she had a package addressed to Rossi, and she had hoped that before leaving the beautiful Arab house she might be free from the nightmare of debt which haunted her day and night.

His absence, therefore, was in the nature of a calamity, and although everyone else was in high spirits over the success of the rehearsal, and thoughts of the coming performance were full of the most joyous anticipation, Valerie herself felt a depression of spirits for which she could hardly account.

As the evening progressed Victor Romney noticed her pallor and extreme quiet with some uneasiness. He had seen her on her first appearance in the big drawing-room, and had been struck by her look of eager, half-exultant expectation, which brightened her eyes and gave a lovely colour to her cheeks. But as the hours passed Victor noticed that anticipation gave way to anxiety in her face, that the sparkle of triumph died out of her eyes and left only the dulness of disappointment. She went through her separate parts lifelessly, posing accurately, but without the delight which she was wont to bring to her impersonations; and once or twice he heard her sigh with a weariness she could not conceal.

And Romney confessed to himself that this attitude on her part was puzzling, if not totally incomprehensible. The only absentee to-night was Count Rossi; yet it could not be he for whom she was so obviously watching and waiting—it could not be his non-appearance which was interfering with her enjoyment, paling her cheek, deadening the light in her eyes?

Suddenly he began to remember his own previous suspicions of an understanding between them—suspicions lulled to rest by the girl's evident avoidance, of late, of the Italian's society. He had thought—and so, apparently, had other people—that there existed some sort of friendship between the two, and he had not forgotten that day on the tennis court when Rossi had made the match into a duel between himself and his girl opponent. Yet Valerie had rarely spoken of Rossi in anything but terms of carefully concealed aversion; and when Victor had ventured to remonstrate with her on the occasion of an earlier rehearsal, alleging as his reason for disliking to see him with her, that he would not have trusted his own sister with the Italian, Valerie had seemed to be only too ready to agree with his estimate of the man.

Yet he could not altogether forget the episode of the letter he had posted for her on the occasion of their first unceremonious meeting; and even Sir Eric had spoken of the attentions the Count had paid, or had wished to pay, his young niece, before authority, in the shape of her uncle, interfered.

What if, after all, the girl had encouraged these attentions, had found Rossi's homage desirable? Rossi was not, so Romney told himself rather vindictively, a man other men cared about. He was too suave, too sly, too—too secretive: but women liked that silky manner, the hint of mystery which hung about him, and he was undeniably good-looking, attractive in a sleek, panther-like fashion, which doubtless appealed to the romantic of the other sex.

Yet he could not believe that Valerie, his Atalanta, as he called her to himself, could find attraction in the Italian.

She was too healthy, too eager, too vital to care for that type of man.

And as he reached this conclusion Romney told himself with a leaping of his pulses that he must delay no longer to put his own fortune to the test. For he realised now why Valerie's pallor, her evident distress, were disquieting to him. It was because he wanted her for himself, because he could not bear to think of her growing pale for the sake of another man, because the bare idea of Ross having power to dull the sparkle in her eyes, to bring the droop of disappointment to her lips, was unbearable.

He must have her for his own. And although his path was not yet clear, although there was a formidable obstacle, in the person of Lucia Holland, to be overcome, he determined that at the first fitting opportunity he would ask Valerie Rivers to marry him.

The opportunity might not be at hand—certainly not now, in the midst of this noisy, restless crowd of men and women, bent only on pleasure and admiration, in spite of the excellent object for which, ostensibly, they laboured. No. To woo Valerie he must find her alone—out in the desert, perhaps. For another moonlight picnic had been projected ; and there, in the midst of the vast empty wilderness, beneath the sky glowing with stars, all aflame with the white fires of the moon, he might find courage to lay his homage at her swift feet, to place his heart between her slender hands, to offer his tribute of a man's strength, a man's honour, a man's love, at the shrine of her virginal maidenhood.

And at the bare thought of her acceptance of the gift Romney felt his heart-beats quicken. He could not bear to mingle with his fellows in that moment of revelation ; and with a muttered excuse to his neighbours he vacated his place in the throng of admiring spectators who watched Mrs. van Ralton's admirable posing as the Rossettian Lilith, and slipping out into the hall climbed the great staircase and found a quiet niche in the gallery above where he might dream in peace.

Half an hour later Valerie, her part over, was searching in the so-called green-room for her wraps when a note was slipped into her hand by one of the many Arab servants who were always in evidence in Mrs. Graham's house ; and on examining the same Valerie discovered her own name written in Rossi's pointed handwriting.

Wondering a little she opened the note, and the room being practically empty no one watched her as she read the few lines written on a sheet of thick white paper.

"*Cara Signorina*"—so it ran,

"I dare not hope that you have noticed my absence this evening. Yet it has a cause—in the illness of Madame my mother; and since it is imperative that I leave for Italy to-morrow, may I crave for the favour of a few words of farewell? My car is here, and if you permit I will drive you home. At least allow me to say *Addio* ere I quit Cairo—and you—for a time whose extent I have [illegible] yet, of determining.

"Your sorrowing sl[illegible]

"PAOLO GIOVANNI ROSSI.

For two or three minutes Valerie stood gazing at these few lines as though their sense had hardly penetrated her brain. Yet that they had done so was unmistakable, for she was thinking, thinking hard as she stood there apparently unmoved.

If Rossi were leaving Cairo she must pay her debt before he went. This was her first coherent thought; and in this manner Rossi's shrewd prediction as to her actions was justified. The natural corollary followed—and again Rossi had judged her correctly. To pay him she must comply with his request for a farewell interview; and since she did not wish for witnesses to the transaction which must take place between them, then she would do well in the circumstances to accept his offer to drive her home. Once or twice, since the rehearsals began, he had sent her home in his car when her own attendant had been late in arriving; and Sir Eric had accepted the courtesy without apparent displeasure. So that she did not think that he would object on this occasion; and it was a heaven-sent opportunity to pay her debt and bid him a final farewell in terms which he could not mistake.

Drawing her satin wrap closely round her she left the green-room and went into the great pillared hall. There, standing by the door, was Rossi, his opera hat crushed beneath his arm, his cloak hanging from his shoulders in the foreign mode he affected; and as she slipped quietly across the marble pavement he came towards her with a quiet, rather grave greeting, which was in keeping with the news he had given her in his letter.

She began to speak, to say a word of sympathy in a low voice; but his manner was preoccupied, and she was not sure that he heard what she said. But he asked her, immediately, though in a half-absent tone, if he were to be allowed the privilege of taking her home in his car.

She hesitated.

"I—I think my uncle has sent his man for me. But—perhaps if your car is there——"

"Thank you." He took her hesitation for consent. "After all, it is for the last time."

As he spoke Valerie felt suddenly the weight of the money she carried in her bag, and remembering how the hope of freedom depended on an interview with this man, she hesitated no longer. On the way home she would give him the money; and then—her heart bounded at the thought—she would be free from all obligation, free to make what she would of her life, free to choose her own friends without fear of interference.

"I will come with you," she said quietly. "Thank you for asking me to drive in your car."

As she moved towards the door a gleam of light from one of the wonderful hanging lamps fell full upon her; and Rossi saw, with a great leap of all his pulses, that she was wearing Lucia Holland's pearls round her slim white throat. He caught barely a glimpse as her satin wrap fell asunder for a second, but before she had gathered it round her again he had made certain of his stupendous luck; and gambler that he was, his whole being thrilled with a superstitious feeling that for once the goddess of chance was on his side.

Valerie might easily have returned the pearls to their owner—she might not, indeed, have been made their custodian on this particular occasion; but she had evidently worn and forgotten them; and the first step along the difficult path he had mapped out had been rendered unaccountably easy.

Doing his best to conceal the excitement which burned within him he helped Valerie carefully into the luxurious car, where she sank into a corner and drew her wrap more closely round her, hiding all sight of the beautiful pearls which lay, a foam of white loveliness, on her milky throat.

With a few words to Luigi, Rossi entered the car, and immediately the situation which he had foreseen ever since he heard of the sale of the emerald ring, developed on the lines which he had expected it to follow.

"Count Rossi." The girl's voice was quick, unsteady. "I want, please, to pay you back the money I owe you. I meant to give it to you to-night if you had been at the rehearsal, but I have it here, so will you please take it—with my best gratitude for your—your kindness in lending it to me?"

Now, indeed, Rossi blessed the chance which had led him to pass Poiret's shop this afternoon. Had this situation come upon him suddenly, without preparation, it was possible that he might have muddled it, have failed to turn it to advantage. But being prepared he knew exactly how to deal with it, and his answer proved that the hours which he had devoted to the working out his great *coup* had not been wasted.

"*Ma—signorina!*" He did not attempt to take the packet which she held towards him. "What talk is this? There is surely no question of repayment between you and me? I had thought it had all been made clear to you when we last spoke of this matter."

She looked at him in perplexity, and the hand holding the packet shook visibly.

"But, Count Rossi, of course I intended to pay my debt. Why, it has never been out of my mind since—since that night. But I had not expected to be able to pay it so soon."

He said nothing, judging silence would serve him best; and after a moment's puzzled scrutiny she spoke again.

"Count Rossi, please take the money. I can't feel happy while I am in your debt. And if you are going away to-morrow it may be ages before we meet again."

She laid the packet down, rather shyly, on his knee, and Rossi made a pretence of accepting the situation *faute de mieux*.

"As you will, *signorina*. For my part I had hoped there would be no talk of repayment, but since you wish it I can but bow to your decree."

"Oh, thank you so much!" In her relief she spoke eagerly. "It's been such a weight on my mind! And—you'll tear up that paper I signed, won't you?"

Now that the crucial moment had come Rossi was as cool as he had ever been in his life, and his voice was devoid of anything but a rather amused kindness as he answered her.

"I fear, little lady, you are not much versed in business matters, or you would hesitate to suggest so impracticable a proceeding!"

She looked at him quickly.

"I don't understand——"

"No, *signorina*, that is evident!" He laughed pleasantly. "Don't you know that to tear up your note, your I.O.U., would be a most unwise thing to do? You see a duplicate note of that kind may easily be forged"—he was watching her closely as he spoke—"and the only legal way of cancelling it is for me to sign at the bottom a declaration that I have received full payment for the sum owing. Then no one could possibly deny that the debt had been repaid; and you may rest assured that there is no loophole for any fraud."

For a moment after he ceased speaking there was a silence; and he wondered, cynically, if his bluff had been successful. He was trading, as he knew, on the colossal ignorance of the average woman in money matters, and it was surely safe to suppose that where even women of the world sometimes came to grief, a mere schoolgirl would hardly be possessed of greater acumen. After all a study of finance, as exemplified in the borrowing and lending of money, is not included in the usual curriculum of knowledge dealt out at a boarding school for girls, and it was extremely probable that the whole transaction was something of a mystery even to a girl of Valerie's cleverness.

Yet though he would not have confessed it to himself, the pause before she replied to his last speech seemed to him to be ominously prolonged, and he had time for a passing doubt as to the success of his bluff before she spoke—and in speaking proved that once again his intuition had served him faithfully.

"If that is so," said Valerie—and her voice had lost its eagerness and sounded tired—"will you return the paper to me when you have signed it?"

"Of course, *signorina*, I will sign it to-night. But——" He broke off, uttering an exclamation as though suddenly taken aback; and Valerie took alarm from his manner immediately.

"What is the matter, Count Rossi? You—you haven't *lost* the paper, have you?"

"Lost it—oh no, no." He smiled reassuringly. "But I was wondering how I could ensure you receiving it in safety. I leave Cairo at daybreak to-morrow, and I do not like to entrust the paper to the post, in case it should—well, go astray or fall into wrong hands."

As he had hoped, his words awoke her fears once more.

"Oh, no, I couldn't risk that. And my uncle might see the envelope." She flushed hotly as the naïve admission crossed her lips.

"Yet I cannot deliver it myself, and my confidential servant comes with me." He bit his lip, pretending to be taken aback at this unexpected obstacle to a speedy settlement of the matter.

She watched him in silence, her eyes pleading with him, unconsciously, to find a solution to the problem; and presently, to her intense relief, he sat up briskly and gave vent to an expression of satisfaction.

"Eureka! I have it!" He consulted his watch with a clever pretence of calculation. "That is to say, if my plan meet with your approval."

"You have a plan?" She spoke eagerly.

"*Si, si!*" He clapped his hands softly. "The saints be praised, it is yet early, and there is plenty of time for my little scheme! Now, *cara*, my suggestion is this. My chauffeur can, when necessary, drive—oh, *comme le diable!*—and he will have us at my Villa in what you English call the twinkle of an eye——"

"At your Villa! But——"

He cut short her horrified protest with a laughing exclamation.

"Do not speak yet, I implore you! Let me unfold to you my plan, which like all perfect strategies is simplicity itself. To resume, Luigi drives us on the wings of the wind to the Villa, I procure the paper, make the necessary declaration thereon, return it to you, Luigi once more turns my car into the likeness of a whirlwind, we fly into the city, I leave you at the door of your honoured uncle's home, and *—voilà! C'est fini!*"

He could hear her breathing quickly beside him, and guessed that prudence and desire warred within her. That she had believed his earlier statements he knew without a doubt, and that her anxiety to regain possession of the I.O.U. she had signed was intense he realised plainly. But he was in the dark as to whether she would dare to repeat her visit to the Villa; and without that repetition all his carefully planned stratagem would fall to pieces.

Quickly, like the artist in intrigue that he was, he added another stone to the fabric he had so cleverly built up.

"There will be no need for you to enter the Villa unless you choose. I will hasten in and sign the paper—the whole affair may be over in three minutes with no trouble to yourself."

"Oh, if I needn't come in——" She breathed more freely, and he knew instinctively that the battle was won—so far. "And if your man can really be very quick——"

"You shall see how he can drive," said Rossi gaily; and lifting the speaking-tube beside him he gave the man some rapid instructions in Italian. Then turning back to Valerie he added, laughing, "Nothing pleases Luigi better than to bid him hasten! And since the roads are clear at this time of night you shall see what he can do when he is on his mettle!"

Having gained his point Rossi was anxious to set his passenger's mind at rest; and with this end in view he began to speak lightly about the *Tableaux Vivants*, asking how to-night's rehearsal had gone, and lamenting his own inevitable absence from the final performance.

"It is to take place within a fortnight, is it not? And there is no hope of my return in time, I fear." He spoke with apparent regret. "Even if my mother recovers from this attack it will be weeks before she is herself again."

"I'm sorry your mother is ill." Though she was strung up to the highest pitch of impatience Valerie found sufficient self-control to speak quietly. "But don't you think you may find her better than you expect? I mean—at a distance illness is sometimes exaggerated."

"*Sissignorina.*" He nodded thoughtfully. "Until to-day I had hoped that the accounts I received were a trifle what you call highly coloured. But the telegram which was promised me, should her illness take a favourable turn, has not come, and I fear there is nothing to be hoped for in the way of over-anxiety from those who watch by her side."

His voice trembled slightly on the last words, for Rossi was one of those naturally excellent actors whose acting deceives even themselves; and although to the best of his belief Countess Rossi was in her usual serene health he could not speak of her supposititious illness, of the anxiety of the watching household, without a tremor in his soft Southern voice, which was not lost upon the girl who sat beside him in the car.

For a moment, indeed, Valerie forgot her own affairs in sympathy with the man who spoke so affectionately of his mother; and the look she bent upon Rossi was full of a very sweet friendliness which was as a rule foreign to her brown eyes when they looked upon him.

As though he appreciated her unspoken sympathy Rossi ventured to lay his hand over hers for a silent second, after which he appeared to pull himself together with something of an effort, and turned to look out of the window at his side in an endeavour to discover how far they had travelled towards their destination.

A short time later the car drew up in front of the Villa; and as Valerie stirred in her corner Lady Lucia's pearls gleamed whitely between the folds of her satin coat, giving Rossi the clue for which he had been patiently waiting.

"*Signorina*, forgive me, but are those Lady Lucia Holland's pearls that you are wearing round your neck?"

She uttered a startled cry, and putting up both hands clutched the pearl string in dismay.

"Oh, yes! I've forgotten them again! What will Lady Lucia say? She gave them to me before her last picture and I never thought of them again!"

"Come, Miss Rivers, don't look so distressed!" He rallied her gently. "Her ladyship will know that her treasures are safe with you! But"—he paused in the act of opening the door of the car—"I think after all it will be wiser for you to enter the house for a moment. I do not like to leave you alone, out here, to sit there with that fortune round your neck!"

His words were skilfully chosen, as though the safety of the pearls was his main thought, and the girl looked at him undecidedly.

"But—if I come in—someone may see me——"

"No one shall see you. I promise you that; but—what are you trying to do?"

She had lifted the string of pearls over her shining head as he spoke; and now she was attempting to put it into the silk bag which had held the money she had given to Rossi.

"I thought if I put them here they would be safe. But they won't go in. I do wish I hadn't been so careless as to bring them away!"

"Let me take care of them till we are back in Cairo, Miss Rivers." He spoke formally, as though the matter were a business one; and after another vain attempt to cram the necklace into the bag she handed it to him with a sigh of relief.

"You'll be awfully careful of them, won't you?" Her voice was anxious, and he reassured her quickly.

"They will be perfectly safe, I promise you." He held out his hand to her, and scarcely realising what she did, she jumped out of the car and stood beside him at the bottom of the steps leading to the veranda which ran round the Villa, forming an additional sitting-room for the master of the house and his guests.

"Now"—he was purposely brisk—"let us go in and get what we want, and in five minutes we will be en route for Cairo once more. But—*scusi!* I have left the precious money in the car. One moment, *carissima,* and I will be with you again."

He hurried across the veranda and down the steps into the garden, and as Valerie stood watching him she saw him retrieve the little packet of money from the interior of the car, after which he spoke to the Neapolitan, who murmured a few words in reply. Then Rossi sprang up the steps once more and rejoined Valerie, who by this time was beginning to feel a little happier, since all this was but the prelude to her longed-for release from the position she had found so intolerable.

She even paused to admire some wonderful tapestries from Luxor which hung in the large, pillared hall, and taking advantage of her mood, Rossi pointed out one or two objects of interest—a beautifully carved brass stork from Benares, some wonderful ivories from Japan. In spite of herself Valerie found the things worthy of inspection; but she would not spend much time over them, and Rossi did not press her to linger.

Instead he led her across the hall to the great drawing-room into which he had previously taken her; and as they reached the doorway, where instead of the conventional door there hung a curtain of marvellous Chinese embroidery, he observed gently that if she would rest within a moment he would hasten to fetch the document for which they had come and would then detain her no longer.

"You will permit me to offer you a cup of coffee—or a glass of sherbet!" He was holding aside the curtain for her as he spoke, but she answered hurriedly in the negative, and he let the subject drop immediately.

"*Bene!* I will be swift, and you—if you will deign to rest a moment on the divan no one shall disturb you until I return."

She was within the room as he finished speaking, and as he let the heavy curtain fall into place behind them Valerie went forward towards the centre of the room where a large couch, heaped with cushions, made an inviting oasis in the vast space of polished golden floor.

"I'll sit here and wait for you, Count Rossi," she said quietly, standing beside the couch. "But you'll be quick, won't you? It's getting late, and I really ought to have been home by now."

"*Bella Donna,* I hasten to do your bidding!" Rossi smiled as he answered her; and the next moment he had hurried away, leaving her alone.

Relieved by his haste, yet vaguely uneasy still, Valerie did not sit down, but wandered towards the grand piano which stood in the shadows at the far end of the long room.

A sudden noise, as of a chair pushed back, made her start affrightedly; and as she turned towards the window recess whence the noise had sounded she shrank back in terror, clasping her hands together on her breast, her eyes dilating, her face growing chalk-white with alarm.

For she was not, as she had thought, alone in the great room. Coming towards her were two men in evening dress, cigarettes in hand; and on the face of the foremost she read a meaning smile which spoke more plainly than any words his ready interpretation of her presence there.

She did not know the man, had never seen him before, but instinctively she feared and disliked his thin, cynical face, his sneering lips and cold eyes.

But she knew the other man—knew, too, that he had recognised her; and with all her heart and soul she longed for the earth to yawn beneath her feet and engulf her for ever from the eyes of men.

The second man was the young Frenchman, M. Vennin, who had been her partner on that fatal night when she had borrowed money from Rossi to pay her debts; and as she saw his face, watched the lazy smile with which he approached her die away, to be replaced by something like genuine amazement, which in its turn gave way to consternation, Valerie realised beyond all shadow of doubt that this second visit to the Villa, from which she had hoped so much, was the crowning folly of her whole career.

## XVI

For one appalling moment Valerie believed she was going to faint. Everything went black before her eyes, and the floor danced up and down in a distracting wave; but gradually the universe steadied itself once more, and as things began to regain their normal shapes, and she realised that she was still standing upright, Valerie understood, with a throb of gratitude to some unseen providence, that the danger of fainting was past.

As her gaze cleared she saw that M. Vennin was looking at her rather vaguely, as though uncertain how to proceed; and although an older woman would have realised whence sprang this apparent reluctance to claim acquaintance with her, Valerie was at once too young and too shaken to pretend ignorance of his identity.

"Good evening, M. Vennin." Her lips quivered as she spoke; and the young Frenchman, who had met her several times under the shadow of Sir Eric's wing, felt with the intuition of his race that whatever she might be doing *dans cette galère* she was doing it innocently, without idea of guilt.

This conviction coloured the gentle tone in which he replied to her.

"*Bon soir, mademoiselle.* It is some time since I have had the pleasure of meeting you, but *sans doute* it is the *Tableaux Vivants* which take up so much time."

"Yes. We are all very busy with them." She was gazing wistfully at him as she spoke, her eyes full of an unconscious appeal to him not to judge her harshly; and M. Vennin, who had the true French reverence for the innocence of *la jeune fille,* told himself indignantly that Rossi was a cad of the first water to bring the girl here at midnight.

He had forgotten the presence of the other man, but Mr. Roger Desmond had no intention of retiring from the scene without an introduction to the heroine of the piece.

To this end he murmured a word in his friend's ear; and although the Frenchman would have evaded the responsibility had it been feasible to do so, he realised that refusal was useless, and accordingly performed the ceremony with true Gallic courtesy.

"I don't think we've met before, have we, Miss Rivers?" Desmond spoke familiarly. "Are you a resident in Cairo, may I ask? Or a bird of passage like myself?"

She looked at him for a moment, vaguely offended by the half-laughing insolence she sensed in his manner; but fortunately for her Rossi returned before she had time to speak, and immediately a new element entered the conversation.

"*Sapristi!* You here—Vennin—and you, Mr. Desmond! But—what then has taken you, my friends, that you do not respect my request to postpone this meeting until I return from Italy?"

"Postpone? Come, Rossi, that isn't a hospitable manner in which to greet your guests, who have been waiting here since ten o'clock, by the way, with throats as dry as a lime-kiln!"

Desmond laughed disagreeably as he spoke, and Rossi turned to him with an admirably simulated expression of half-regretful doubt.

"But—did you not then receive my note telling you of my departure, to-morrow, for my home in Italy, and begging you to cancel our appointment for this evening?"

"I received no note," returned the other man lightly "And no more did M. Vennin here."

"No?" Rossi turned to the young Frenchman. "Then, Messieurs, I owe you a thousand pardons for the untrustworthiness of my messenger! But——"

He stopped abruptly, and no one unacquainted with the workings of his mind would have suspected his deep and intense satisfaction at the success of his plot. Rather, judging from the expression of dismay which stole over his features, one would have sworn that he was solely occupied with the exigencies of the present embarrassing situation; and as he turned to Valerie his manner was convincingly halting and confused.

"Miss Rivers has been good enough to come here to-night on behalf of her uncle, Sir Eric Mayne——" He stopped short, biting his lip as though in annoyance at his inadvertent mention of the name; but after a short pause he hurried on with his explanation. "I am leaving for Italy in the morning, and I have some books belonging to my friend which I was desirous of returning before my departure. So Miss Rivers very kindly came with me to fetch the volumes."

The excuse was not in the least convincing, as no one knew better than its inventor; but since he had no desire to convince either of his guests it did well enough; and whatever M. Vennin may have thought, he accepted the explanation with a charming courtesy.

"Then we will not delay you in your search for the books for *mademoiselle.*" He was genuinely sorry for the pale girl who stood before them, clinging to the back of a chair with slender, desperate hands. "Come, Desmond. I will see you home in my automobile. Meanwhile—*adieu, mademoiselle.*"

He bowed to her with a rather accentuated politeness; and Valerie's white lips moved in an attempted farewell. Then Desmond also prepared to take his leave, but his manner held none of the Frenchman's courtesy.

"Well, good-night, Miss Rivers. Sorry to have butted in and spoilt your evening, but I hope we'll meet again some day."

As he spoke a wave of colour flooded Valerie's pale face, and she threw back her fair head with a gesture of surprising dignity.

"Please don't hurry away on my account," she said clearly. "Count Rossi, if you will be good enough to let your man take me home, there is no need for your friends to leave you."

She turned to the door as though expecting his compliance; and after a second's hesitation Rossi accepted her ruling amiably.

"*Sissignorina.* But of course Luigi shall take you home at once. You prefer to go alone?"

"Please." Although she held her golden head proudly erect Valerie was very near to breaking point and she was conscious of only one desire—to escape from this vast, unfriendly room, from these men with their cold or pitying eyes, their friendly words and inward laughter.

To get away from them, to be alone, free to give vent to the sobs which rose thickly, in her throat, free to hide her shamed face in the kindly darkness—this was the boon she craved; and as she moved, almost blindly, to the door, it seemed to Valerie that she was in a chaotic, dreadful dream, since it could not be she who had stood before those men in this position which even she knew to be horribly, fatally invidious.

In grave silence Rossi attended her to the door of the Villa, led her across the veranda and down the steps, and helped her into the car which stood waiting. In silence also he tucked the rugs round her light skirts; and not until he had shut the door did he put a slip of paper into her cold hand.

"*Voilà!* The paper about which there is so much trouble!" He spoke kindly, even rallyingly, but she did not attempt to reply, though her fingers closed desperately over the thing he had given her.

For a moment Rossi hesitated, standing with his hand on the door of the car. Then he leaned forward and spoke in a low voice.

"*Chère* Valerie, even you can see that after to-night there can be but one course to pursue. When I return from Italy I will call upon Sir Eric and make due proposals for your hand. Come, do not look so tragic, dear little one. All is not lost—and to youth many indiscretions are easily forgiven."

A moment later the car rolled away into the darkness, and Rossi stood looking after it with an expression of mingled triumph and regret.

But he had little time for reflection on what had passed, for there was work to be done; and with a shrug of the shoulders Rossi re-entered the house and joined his friends in the great drawing-room.

As he came in the men who had been waiting for him turned to him with two separate expressions of relief, and Rossi was shrewd enough to guess that their views on the subject of the late embarrassing episode were widely diverse.

How indeed could it be otherwise, since M. Vennin was a romantic of the true French school, while Desmond was a battered cosmopolitan of the type who, having looked for the worst in human nature in all the so-called worst countries of the world, had naturally found it, thereby rendering himself incapable of distinguishing between sin and folly, between virtue unfortunate and vice triumphant.

To Marie-Joseph Vennin, Valerie Rivers' nocturnal visit, unchaperoned, to a man of Rossi's character, was so unaccountable that it was evident, to him, that it was made in innocence. Had she been the flighty minx which such a visit seemed to label her she would have known better than to visit so notorious a person as this Italian, since before visiting him she would certainly have discovered a good deal about his reputation. In other words, only an innocent woman would have dared to put herself in this position, to have walked, open-eyed, into so compromising a situation; and Vennin would have staked his life that there had been, on the girl's part at least, no sinister motive behind this strangely unconventional proceeding.

But the other man summed up the matter more coarsely when, as the door closed behind Rossi and the girl, he turned to the Frenchman with a grin.

"Friend Rossi has a pretty taste, eh, M. Vennin? The face of a baby-angel—and the soul of a harlot. That's the most fascinating combination the devil ever put together for the destruction of man. Isn't it so?"

For a moment the young Frenchman looked at the speaker with an expression of disgust which pierced even the cosmopolitan complacency on which he prided himself. But just as Desmond wondered, a little uneasily, what form the other's reply would take, Vennin gave a Gallic shrug of the shoulders and walked away down the long room in a silence which spoke more eloquently than words.

"*Eh bien, mes amis?*" Rossi stood in the doorway regarding them, and his expression, half defiant, half shamefaced, was excellently done. "Now that we are alone we will smoke a soothing cigar, and perhaps a drink—or a cup of coffee——"

He moved forward, with his usual grace, to a small table in a corner on which stood the usual preparations for refreshment, but before he had time to fill a glass Vennin interposed.

"One moment, *M. le Comte.*" He spoke formally. "Will it not be well for us to commence the evening from this point, to forget what may have taken place before you entered the room just now?"

For a second, as he replaced the empty glass he had just taken in his hand, Rossi's face wore an expression of something not unlike annoyance. He had invited the men to his house a few days ago without ulterior motive, but when that afternoon he had decided to make his grand coup, he had been quick to see their value in his scheme of things, and needless to say the messages cancelling the invitation had been non-existent.

So far Fate had been with him, and it had not occurred to him that what he called the Frenchman's cursed sentimentality would threaten to spoil his carefully-laid plans.

For it was essential that the story of Valerie's visit to him should leak out—discreetly, of course, not shouted blatantly from the roof-tops, but whispered, here and there, into receptive ears, so that while an open *esclandre* were avoided, there was yet an undercurrent of gossip which should come, eventually, to the hearing of Sir Eric Mayne. And then, just at the moment when Valerie's future was menaced, when it was a mere toss-up whether she were openly ostracised to the extent of having to leave Cairo, or only whispered about in a hundred drawing-rooms, *then* Rossi would come forward, full, indeed, of remorse that his carelessness had endangered the reputation of the woman he sought for his bride, but full also of a chivalrous desire to make her his Countess forthwith, and so silence the slanderous tongues which should dare to speak of his beloved in terms of malice and backbiting.

But a second's reflection served to show Rossi that however loyally M. Vennin might keep Valerie's secret, it was a "*secret de Polichinelle*" at the best, since Mr. Desmond was no Galahad, no spotless knight who would die to protect the honour of a woman. And accordingly he turned to answer Vennin's speech with a very convincing show of relief.

"*Amico mio*"—he left the little table and came forward to lay his hand on the other's arm—"you have suggested that which I longed, yet did not dare, to suggest. As men of the world we recognise the untowardness of to-night's happenings. I, and I alone, am to blame. I should never have suggested the lady's visit—I know it only too well. But the books of which I spoke are valuable, and I did not care to leave them here when I set out for Italy."

He paused, effectively, began to speak again, checked himself, and finally spread out his hands deprecatingly.

"I alone am to blame," he repeated; "but alas, should the story become public property, I should not be the one to bear that blame. And so, if I may trust you, my friends, if I may rely upon your discretion, your chivalry, the episode may be buried, for ever, in oblivion."

"*Pour moi—c'est fini!*" M. Vennin made a gesture of finality; and Rossi turned to the other man with a capital assumption of anxiety thinly veiled.

"And you, *M'sieu?*"

"Oh, so far as I'm concerned the matter's done with!" Desmond spoke rather impatiently. "You can have a whole harem of beauties here, and I'll shut my eyes to every one of them if you say so. But what about that drink, Rossi? The confounded sand gets down my throat till it rasps like a file."

"*Per Bacco*, but I am a discourteous host!" Rossi turned back to his glasses with an air of dismay. "Forgive me, my friends, and let us enjoy a peaceful five minutes ere I must turn you out to continue my preparations for to-morrow."

"You are really going to Italy, *mon ami?*"

"But yes!" Rossi looked surprised. "Did I not tell you, there is illness in my house, and I must return thither without delay. Unless, of course"—he spoke reflectively—"unless I should receive a cable of reassurance in the morning."

"In that case, my dear Rossi, your preparations will have been wasted."

"Quite so." An odd look came into Rossi's black eyes, and for a moment his hand strayed towards an inner pocket. "And yet I do not think all my preparations would be wasted. . . ."

It was not until Valerie was lying in bed, open-eyed in the merciful darkness which she craved with all her heart, that a new thought came to her with such over-whelming force that in a moment her hardly-won composure was torn again from her quivering soul.

She had reached the flat and her own room without disturbing the household; and there, with the doors locked and the curtains closely drawn, she had given way at last to the flood of shame, of misery, of utter desolation which had rushed over her when she stood facing the two men in Rossi's drawing-room.

It had seemed to her that never would she regain her self-respect, never feel—she hesitated, but the word would come—*clean* again. She had acted ignorantly, of course, but she had acted, none the less, like a fool. Now, too late, she saw the risk she had run; and only an utter imbecile would have expected to come unscathed out of such an adventure. She had known it was a foolish thing to do, but the mere thought of regaining her freedom had driven her to the step; and now, what was she to do? So far from freeing herself she had locked the fetters more closely on her wrists, had given into Rossi's hands the weapon which should surely bar the way to any hope of escape.

If her uncle should get to know—and in her frenzy of panic she felt as though everyone must know, as though the very stones must cry out the tale of her folly in going to the man's house again—if he should learn what she had done, what would he say? If he knew that her arrival there had been witnessed by the two men, that they had seen her confusion, had listened to Rossi's unconvincing explanation of her presence, what would he say—or do?

At the moment her uncle appeared to her as a figure of doom, inexorable, passionless, before whom pleading would be useless, from whom no sympathy, no comprehension might be expected ; and as she lay shivering in the darkness Valerie told herself drearily that probably Uncle Eric would indeed make her marry Rossi, since no one else would overlook her folly, to give it no harsher name.

She wished with all her heart that she had never set foot in Cairo. Yet in the very instant of formulating the wish it was qualified, for she realised that had she not come to Cairo she would not have met Victor Romney.

And only Valerie knew what that meeting had come to signify. In spite of everything she was prepared to cling to her friendship with Victor, although that friendship were menaced by obstacles whose magnitude she could not minimise.

For if Rossi stood in the way, so also did Lady Lucia Holland.

Suddenly a new and terrifying thought flashed into Valerie's mind, and she sat up in bed with locked hands and dilated eyes, her whole body a flame of fear.

The mental picture of Lady Lucia had reminded her of a fact which up to that moment she had forgotten.

Lady Lucia's famous pearls were still in the keeping of Count Paolo Rossi in his Villa on the Shubra Road.

And Count Rossi was leaving Cairo for Italy at an early hour of the day which was even now dawning, a delight of rose and mother-o'-pearl, over the brightening desert sands.

## XVII

Lady Lucia did not discover the disappearance of her pearls until a late hour of the night. She had remained on after the majority of the performers had departed, in order to play bridge with the select few; and it was nearly two o'clock before she entered her suite of rooms in the Savoy Hotel.

Miss Hammond, her companion, had been in bed for several hours, but came sleepily into the sitting-room to ascertain for herself that all was well with her friend, and to see to the boiling of the little silver kettle for the cup of tea without which Lucia refused to go to bed.

Having had a pleasant evening Lucia looked her best; and as Miss Hammond prepared the tea, moving about with the slowness of a person torn from her sleep in the middle of the night, she glanced from time to time at the beautiful face with an admiration she did not attempt to conceal.

Over the black frock which showed up the marvellous whiteness of arms and throat as no colour could do, Lucia wore a wonderful Chinese coat, of blue satin stiff with embroidery; and the blue of the satin matched in brilliance the blue of the great sapphire eyes beneath their level, delicate brows. As, her smooth cheeks flushed to a tender carnation pink, her mouth curving in a little smile, Lucia sank down on to a huge couch and stretched out her slim, arched feet with a gesture of relaxation, she looked an embodiment of loveliness; and for the hundredth time Miss Hammond, an elderly spinster, who had never been more than passably good-looking and was now aristocratically plain, wondered why Providence distributed its favours so unequally.

As she brought Lucia a cup of tea Miss Hammond remarked rather drowsily :

" I told Coralie not to wait up for you to-night. She has what she calls a *migraine*, and I said I would help you to undress. She gave me the key of your jewel-case, so if you like I'll go and lock up your pearls while you drink your tea."

Lucia paused in the act of drinking: then, putting down her cup, she felt at her throat with a hasty gesture unlike her usual calm languor

"How stupid of that child! She has gone off with my pearls—again!" She looked annoyed. "I really must not give them into her charge. She will lose them, or be robbed of them, one day."

"Do you mean little Miss Rivers?"

"Yes. I gave them to her to-night, and then I stayed on to play bridge and forgot them. Well"—Lucia took up her cup again—"they are safe enough, I suppose. But you might ring up Sir Eric's flat in the morning, Rosa, will you? And say I should like my pearls back as soon as Valerie can send them."

"Yes. I will do so." Miss Hammond struggled nobly to suppress a yawn. "Did the pictures go well to-night? The performance is coming very near, is it not?"

"Oh, they went all right." Lucia yawned openly. "Count Rossi didn't turn up, which spoilt one or two effects. But the majority of pictures are practically perfect."

"I suppose that as usual Miss Rivers made a delightful Atalanta?" Miss Hammond admired Valerie's radiant youth. "Mr. Romney is a fortunate man to be brought into contact with a young girl of so much charm. And I think"—she laughed gently—"he appreciates his own good fortune."

"Do you think so?" Lucia yawned again, a trifle ostentatiously this time. "I haven't seen any signs of his appreciation."

"No?" Miss Hammond, who delighted in the love affairs of others, smiled and sighed. "Ah, well, you are too much occupied with your own affairs, my dear, to notice side issues. But I believe we shall hear some interesting news from that quarter ere long."

"Do you?" Lucia stood up and let the Chinese coat slip from her shoulders to the floor. "Well, it's much too late to speculate on matters of this kind; and I'm going to bed. Good-night, Rosa. You needn't bother to help me—

get back to your own bed, you look like an owl that's been out too late."

But for all her expressed desire to rest it was long before Lucia slept. She was all aflame with jealousy in this early morning hour, jealousy of the rival who was slowly but surely undermining her position in the life of Victor Romney.

Until to-night, although she had been shaken now and again by a storm of apprehension, she had never really doubted the issue of her campaign. She had been very patient, very delicate, had controlled her naturally passionate nature, had acted a part foreign to her; and she had been content to wait the result.

But she could wait no longer. Her usually serene confidence was badly shaken—not only by Miss Hammond's words, which were merely an echo of other comments made in her hearing, but by a hundred little incidents, each one trifling in itself, yet overwhelming when presented in the mass.

She could not admit defeat, yet defeat stared her in the face. And as she realised the possibility of failure, a wave of despair swept over her, drowning in a black and rolling flood all the hope, all the hot passionate desire for Victor Romney which was the strongest emotion of all her tempestuous nature.

Whether rightly or wrongly she wanted Romney for her husband. All the force of her wild, undisciplined soul, all the strength of her overbearing jealous heart were set upon his possession. It did not matter to her that her love was selfish, self-seeking, with none of the joy of renunciation, the delight in giving which marks a real and unselfish love. She was akin in her craving to the woman of the South, who loves utterly, fiercely, irrationally. Like her Sicilian sisters Lucia would have worn a dagger in her garter with which to slay an indifferent lover, and she would be utterly unscrupulous in her vengeance against a rival.

And in these eerie morning hours she was gathering up all the forces of her strong and passionate nature to face the issue boldly, to refuse to acknowledge defeat, to snatch, if she could, victory out of the very jaws of disaster.

And though she little knew how in another quarter of the city the girl she hated as a rival lay and trembled in the grip of a great fear, she would have looked forward to the end of the conflict with more confidence had she known of the weapon which had been forged by that same girl's folly a few hours earlier—a weapon which in her capable hands might well vanquish all enemies, might win for her a victory more sweeping, more complete, than she had dared to look for.

In spite of the night she had spent Lady Lucia looked her usual calm, indifferent self as she sat drinking her coffee at ten o'clock in the morning in her sunny sitting-room in the Savoy Hotel.

Miss Hammond, who had been up since eight, was placidly eating her breakfast with the bottled-up appetite induced by two hours' captivity; but Lucia's meal was a mere pretence; and when the telephone bell rang sharply she started as though her thoughts had been very far away.

"That will be Miss Rivers," said Miss Hammond, jumping up briskly. "She was not awake when I rang up earlier, but I left word she was to ring me when she was up."

"About my pearls?" Lucia spoke languidly. "Very well, Rosa. Go and tell her I should like them back at once."

Miss Hammond took down the receiver with the activity which characterised all her movements, and immediately became involved in conversation with an unseen speaker.

"Yes—Miss Hammond, speaking for Lady Lucia. Yes, it is about her pearls. What do you say? Sorry you forgot—yes, yes." She turned, beaming, to Lady Lucia. "Just as we thought, Miss Rivers had forgotten them!"

"Of course." Lucia spoke with a hint of impatience, and Miss Hammond turned to the telephone hastily.

"Yes, Lady Lucia would like them at once. . . . What's that? You will bring them presently? Oh, don't bother—we'll send—or I'll come for them myself."

There was a pause on her part while the speaker at the end of the wire appeared to be explaining something rather carefully; and after a moment Miss Hammond nodded.

"Yes, yes . . . quite safe, of course—yes, we know that. But Lady Lucia would like them as soon as possible. When did you say? Perhaps lunch time . . . but—just wait a moment, my dear, and let me see if Lady Lucia wants them earlier."

"What's the matter, Rosa?" Lucia was leaning back in her long chair smoking a cigarette. "Can't she bring them round at once? She hasn't lost them, I presume?"

"Oh no, Lady Lucia, of course not!" Miss Hammond was visibly fluttered by the mere suggestion. "But Miss Rivers sounds a little hurried. I think perhaps she is only just up—possibly she hasn't even breakfasted yet."

"Don't bother yourself, Rosa." Lady Lucia rose and gathered round her her trailing draperies of blue and grey chiffon. "I'll speak to Miss Rivers—perhaps she can't hear you plainly."

She went to the telephone and began to speak in her rather unmusical voice—that voice which was her least charming attribute.

"That you, Valerie? Naughty child, you carried off my pearls again. I shall begin to think you have designs on them soon."

There was a pause. Then Valerie's voice came rather slowly over the wire.

"I'm very sorry, Lady Lucia. I won't do it again. But—will it do if I bring them along presently—in an hour or so? I—I'm only just up, and—and I think Uncle Eric wants me to do something for him."

"Shall I come for them?" Lucia was faintly intrigued by the girl's manner. "The car will be round presently, and I can call at your flat before I do my shopping."

"Oh, no, I'll bring them." Now her voice sounded flustered. "You don't mind waiting a little while, do you? I—I want to come out—my head aches and I shall like the fresh air."

"As you like." Lucia reflected for a moment. "I'll expect you in about an hour. Till then, *au revoir.*"

She hung up the receiver and came slowly back to her chair, while Miss Hammond made haste to pour out fresh coffee and brought forward the toast and butter that Lady Lucia might help herself.

But at the other end of the wire Valerie stood staring before her in a very terror of apprehension. For so far as she knew Count Rossi had left Cairo at daybreak, and he had not returned Lady Lucia's pearls.

What to do Valerie did not know. She had tried to get into communication with the Italian's Villa, but her repeated efforts had been unavailable; and at last she had come to the conclusion that the place was empty, or that, at least, only the Arab servants remained; and they, she knew from experience, looked upon the telephone as a device born of Shaitan, and therefore unfit for the use of worshippers of Allah.

Yet something must be done. She could not face Lady Lucia without the pearls, yet it was impossible for her to return them almost immediately as she had promised; and to the end of her life Valerie would remember the utter, blank despair of that hour in which she faced a ruin whose anticipation turned her blood to ice.

But it seemed she was to have a reprieve after all. Suddenly the door bell of the flat rang sharply; and with a wild hope that the person who rang might be Rossi himself, Valerie ran down the hall and opened the door hastily, finding herself face to face with Luigi, Rossi's Neapolitan chauffeur.

Saluting her politely, he handed her a little parcel wrapped in brown paper; and as Valerie took it, almost trembling with the reaction from her previous panic, he turned briskly away and hurried down the stone staircase as though wishful to avoid any questioning.

But Valerie was much too thankful to have received the pearls to feel any curiosity on the subject of their return. The moment the door was shut she rushed into her own room, and locking herself in tore the paper off the package and found a large, flat tobacco tin, which when opened disclosed itself as the resting-place of Lady Lucia's famous rope of pearls.

As quickly as her shaking hands would permit her Valerie dressed herself for walking, and a few minutes later she came out into the sunlit street and hailed an *arabeah* which happened to pass at the moment.

Generally speaking, in Cairo one has to direct one's driver *en route* by various cries of "*yemeenak*" or "*shemalak*," aided by sundry pokings with one's stick or umbrella. But the Savoy being one of the landmarks, so to speak, of the city, Valerie's Jehu required no such directions, and in a few moments he drew up outside the hotel, and after depositing his passenger and receiving his fare, clattered off once more with the usual accompaniments of shouts and whip cracking.

With the pearls in a cardboard box inside her muff, which she carried although the day was warm, Valerie was conducted to Lucia's suite of rooms; and in accordance with instructions Miss Hammond took her forthwith into the luxurious bedroom where, at the moment, Lady Lucia was discussing chiffons with Countess Chris.

" Here is Miss Rivers, Lady Lucia." Miss Hammond beamed happily on the trio. " Come along, my dear; I'm sure Lady Lucia will be delighted that you have come at last."

Lucia held out her hand languidly and drew the girl down on to the big couch beside her.

" So you've returned my pearls, you careless child? " She took the box which Valerie held out to her and opened it without haste. " Then I must forgive you, I suppose—but I shan't give them into your keeping again? "

" What, has Valerie been stealing your pearls? " Countess Chris, who loved a discussion on dress, was annoyed at the interruption. " Gracious, child, how pale you look, and you've got great rings round your eyes. You'll lose all your freshness if you stay here much longer."

" I'm all right, thanks." Valerie spoke rather shortly, the strain on her nerves was beginning to tell. " I'm glad you're here, Lady Thirsk, because I can pay my debt to you."

" Debt? Oh, you mean the few pounds you lost the other night? " Countess Chris was genuinely indifferent to money. " Don't let that bother you, my dear. I don't like taking money from babes—but I suppose your uncle pays your debts for you."

" Uncle Eric! Oh no! " Her voice was almost sharp. " He doesn't like me playing for money, and I would never dream of asking him to pay."

" Then it's well to have a big allowance," said Countess Chris with a shrug. " For I seem to remember you losing lots of money a little time ago. Didn't you drop nearly a hundred pounds one night? "

" A hundred pounds? " Lady Lucia's voice sounded faintly surprised. " Where were you playing to lose so much? "

" Mrs. van Ralton's, wasn't it? " Lady Thirsk's monkey-like propensity for mischief was aroused, and it amused her to see the colour come and go in Valerie's face. "Why, Lucia, surely you were there, too; but I suppose you didn't lose."

"It wasn't a hundred pounds." Valerie's tone, in spite of her efforts at self-control, was sharp. "And it was all paid long ago. Lady Thirsk, please, is this right?"

She handed a little packet of sovereigns to Countess Chris, who took it off-handedly, and having counted the contents nodded casually.

"Yes, that's right, thanks very much. I saw a lovely Panama in a shop as I came along, so I think I'll go and buy it with my winnings."

"I must go." Valerie's manner was curiously jerky, and both the older women looked at her in surprise. "Good-bye, Lady Lucia. I'm sorry you were worried about your pearls."

"I wasn't worried, my dear child," Lucia explained indolently. "It was Miss Hammond who seemed to think something had happened to them. I believe she began to wonder if you had lost them, or perhaps sold them to pay your bridge debts."

She had spoken idly, recalling Miss Hammond's doubts with lazy amusement; but both she and Countess Chris were struck by the manner in which Valerie received her jesting speech.

From being white as a lily Valerie grew crimson as any peony. So painful was the blush which flooded face and neck that no one could have ignored its significance, nor could the spectators miss the look of something not unlike panic which sprang into the startled brown eyes as the girl stood in silent terror before the speaker.

For one wild moment, indeed, Valerie wondered whether her transaction with M. Poiret had become public property; or whether—a still more fatal supposition—Lady Lucia knew in whose keeping her pearls had been during the night: and although neither Lucia Holland nor Countess Chris had the slightest clue to her agitation, they could not but read into her attitude a hint of something uncomfortably like guilt as she stood before them, with all the air of a culprit before her accusers.

The next instant Valerie realised that her fears were absurd, that Lady Lucia had spoken in the veriest jest, and with an enormous effort of will she forced a smile, though the flush which had now died away was succeeded by an intense pallor; and with the relaxation of the strain came physical weakness which made her catch the back of the nearest chair to steady herself.

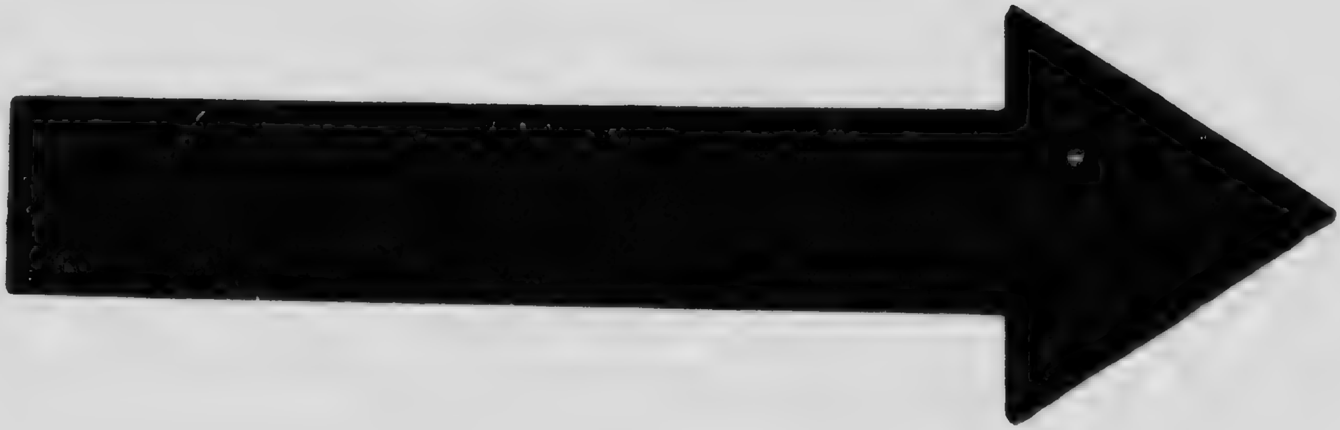
Fortunately for her Lucia turned away to lay the pearls down on her dressing-table; and after a prolonged stare Countess Chris returned to her study of patterns of Egyptian cotton as sold in the Bazars, so that she had a moment in which to clutch at her vanishing self-possession before Lucia's blue eyes once more glanced her way.

"Going? Well, good-bye, Valerie. Thanks for the pearls." Lucia spoke carelessly; and with a murmur in the direction of Lady Thirsk, Valerie turned blindly towards the door and hurried out through the suite until she reached the great staircase, down which she fled without delay, conscious only of a great desire to find herself in the open street once more.

She had been badly frightened by what had taken place. To begin with she had had no idea that her losses on that bygone night had been noted by any save the people with whom she had played; and on the heels of that shock had come another, conveyed by Lady Lucia's allusion to Miss Hammond's uneasiness over the tardy return of the famous pearls.

She knew now, of course, that Lady Lucia had spoken in jest; but the night of suspense through which she had passed had weakened her nerves, and for one awful moment she had wondered whether she were indeed under suspicion; for she understood that her apparent reluctance to return the pearls earlier—reluctance which had covered her real inability to do so—might be capable, in the minds of the women she had just left, of misinterpretation.

So upset did she feel as she hurried home that she even began to wish her uncle would fulfil his half-jesting threat and send her back to England. Cairo was too full of pitfalls for her feet, she made too many mistakes, did too many foolish things; and though for the moment she had warded off disaster, her mind was by no means easy when she remembered her transaction with M. Poiret; and, a thousand times worse, her encounter with the two men in Count Rossi's Villa.



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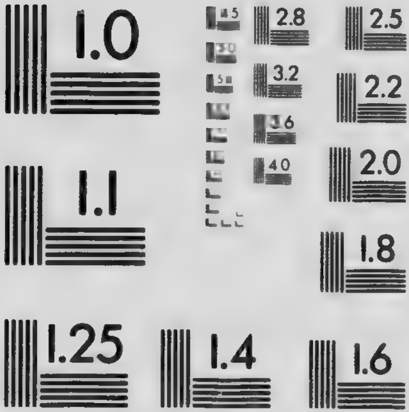

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And above all other fears, one gigantic fear dominated—the fear that if he knew everything her uncle would agree to—nay, perhaps insist on—her marriage with Count Rossi. . . .

When Valerie had left them the two women did not immediately resume their discussion on fashion. Lady Lucia had sunk into a chair by the dressing-table and was idly playing with her recovered rope of pearls, swinging them here and there, and slipping them through her fingers, as a Catholic tells the beads of his rosary. Sir Gordon Holland had been wont to call the rope "Lucia's rosary," and had declared that she had a prayer for each tenth bead, a fantasy at which Lucia smiled indulgently. He declared also that he was sure she knew each separate pearl by heart, and that if by any unlucky chance the necklace was broken up and restrung she would know instantly if any other pearl, whether of more or less value was immaterial, had been substituted for one of hers.

As she played with them now, half-absently, Lucia recalled her late husband's fantastic ideas on the subject, and half involuntarily she let the beautiful shimmering jewels slip through her fingers in a milky cascade.

Suddenly—so suddenly that Countess Chris started from her absorbed study of materials—Lucia uttered an exclamation.

"What's the matter?" Lady Thirsk looked up in surprise. "Has a mosquito bitten you, or have you remembered an important appointment in five minutes?"

"Neither." With lightning celerity Lucia had come to a decision. "I only remembered a letter I ought to have written—an answer to an invitation I can't accept."

"Well, write it now—never mind me," said Lady Thirsk briskly. "That is, if it's a genuine excuse. If not, say so, and I'll depart forthwith."

"No, don't go till we've settled the dress question." Lucia spoke with an attempt at cordiality which did not in the least deceive the sharp-eyed Lady Thirsk. Being, however, good-natured in the main, the latter accepted the situation amiably enough, and gathering together her multitudinous belongings, in the shape of scarf, gloves, silver purse, a bunch of violets, and a parasol—for the sun was growing hot now—she took her leave sweetly, though the glance which she gave Lucia in response to the latter's absent-minded good-bye was distinctly inquiring.

When she had gone Lucia closed the door and came back to the dressing-table with a haste unlike her usual calm languor.

During the last few moments she had made a very curious discovery. And it was a purely instinctive caution which had prompted her to say nothing to Lady Thirsk; for though at present she did not understand what had happened, some sixth sense told her that the greatest secrecy, the most careful diplomacy, would be necessary for the unravelling of the mystery.

For this thing which had happened was strange in the extreme; and as she looked at the magnificent pearls which lay on the polished surface of the dressing-table Lucia owned herself totally unable to account for the phenomenon which had come to her notice.

For her pearls, which should have numbered one hundred and nineteen, had grown, miraculously, to one hundred and twenty. In other words, there was now one pearl too many on her famous rope of pearls.

## XVIII

At lunch-time on the morning of Lady Lucia's discovery a Nubian messenger from the Savoy Hotel entered the carpet shop where Wynne and Romney were studying a rug newly arrived from Teheran. So intent were they on their inspection of the beautiful thing that neither of them observed the advent of the messenger; who, after a moment's embarrassed shuffling of the feet, gave vent to a mighty cough, startling the absorbed carpet-merchants so much that they dropped their precious burden and turned in amazement to see who thus disturbed their peace.

"Now, then, Jim Crow, don't blow us out of the place!" Wynne knew all the messengers and native hangers-on in Cairo. "Have you brought a letter? Hand it over, and after that you can vamoose!"

But the Nubian grinned amiably, disclosing a line of magnificent white teeth in his ebony countenance, and handed Romney the letter he had brought—an attention with which Romney could well have dispensed, seeing from whom the missive came.

He tore it open with a look of anger; and Wynne bent, whistling, over the Teheran rug with an instinctive desire to ignore his friend's annoyance. Knowing the Nubian's *milieu* he could make a shrewd guess as to the identity of the letter-writer; and even Wynne was surprised at Lady Lucia's persistence in her pursuit of the man who only asked to be left in peace.

Having read the note Romney crushed it fiercely in his hand, and turned to the black Mercury, who stood smiling pleasantly, if a trifle vacantly, beside him.

"All right, Sambo." His voice was savage. "You can go—no answer. Savvy?"

The Nubian made an obeisance, still grinning, and backed out of the shop, while Romney turned to his friend, literally grinding his teeth with rage.

"How the hell that woman can go on persecuting me like this!" He was much too angry to mince his words. "Look here, Max--read that"—he tossed him the note—"and tell me what in God's name you make of it!"

Catching the sheet cleverly, Wynne unfolded it and read Lucia's letter as desired. Although like most men he had an objection to reading other people's private correspondence, he had no scruples where Lady Lucia was concerned; and he was genuinely curious to know what devilment she was up to now.

The letter was not explanatory.

"DEAR VICTOR"—the opening made Max whistle softly—"I must see you to-day on important business. As it concerns, rather oddly, someone we both know, the matter permits of no delay; and I will therefore expect you here at five o'clock.

"Yours,

"LUCIA."

Having read the epistle through, Max looked at his friend in bewilderment.

"What does she mean? It sounds like—well, something unpleasant. Who's the mysterious someone involved? Not me, I hope, old chap? I know her ladyship hasn't much time for me, but——"

"Oh, it's not you, Max." Victor spoke impatiently. "It sounds jolly like a threat, though. And you're right in supposing it's something unpleasant. Where that woman is concerned it couldn't well be anything else."

"You'll go, of course?"

"Yes." But he spoke in a tone of cold fury which boded ill for someone. "Of course I'll go. God knows what mischief she's hatching; but I'll not put up with it any longer. She will have to realise that I'm through with her; and if she doesn't like the way I put it, well, she's only herself to thank. Good God, Max, am I *never* to be free from the consequences of my folly?"

He turned on his friend, his eyes blazing like two blue flames, and Wynne realised that he was in earnest, that from henceforth Lucia Holland need expect no pity, no chivalry, at his hands. And since Wynne both distrusted and feared Lucia he rejoiced inwardly to think that at last her domination, so long—too long—endured, was at an end.

"Let's go to lunch," he said, flinging the rug into a corner. "I'll tell Joseph"—their Greek clerk—"to keep an eye on things while we're out, and I want a drink badly."

"Right," said Romney, reaching for his Panama; but although his acquiescence was ready his voice was still seething with fury; and Max told himself gleefully that for once Delilah had overreached herself.

At five o'clock that afternoon Victor Romney was shown into Lady Lucia's sitting-room at the Savoy. The sun poured in through one of the large windows, lighting up the big bowls of English-looking snap-dragons, cream, yellow, rose, which stood here and there on tables and escritoire, and flashing back from the silver kettle and tea service which travelled everywhere with Lady Lucia.

Romney frowned as his eyes fell on the preparations for tea; and his frown deepened as the moments passed, and still Lucia's steps tarried by the way.

When he had endured twenty minutes' waiting Romney rose angrily. He told himself that he had no more time to waste here; and if Lucia could not keep an appointment made by herself she must just put up with his departure.

Gathering up hat, gloves, and stick, he strode towards the door; but at that moment it opened and Lucia herself stood in the aperture smiling at him, a welcoming light in her wonderful sapphire eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Victor." She came up to him and laid one small, suède-covered hand on his arm. "I meant to be in at five o'clock, but something went wrong with the car. However, here I am now, and we will have tea at once."

"I don't want any tea, thanks." He spoke stiffly. "My visit to-day is purely on business, and I might remind you that my time is of importance."

"Of course—and I'm so sorry!" She was using the few musical tones of her voice. "But I *must* have a cup of tea first. I really won't delay you five minutes. The kettle is boiling, and the tea is in the pot."

Fuming, yet impotent, he stood aside while she filled the teapot from the silver kettle, and sat down behind the little table. She was wearing a perfectly-cut gown of putty-coloured cloth, with a small sable collar fastened with a velvet rose of a curious shade of blue. Her marvellous hair was almost hidden by a close-fitting black hat with a white aigrette: and the note of luxury, soft, sensuous, feminine luxury, was conspicuously absent from her appearance, which to-day was business-like, almost severe.

Something about her made Victor curiously apprehensive. He was used to the siren, with her laces and jewels, her ermine, her whole appearance of femininity; and this composed, taut aspect disconcerted him oddly. He did not like the serene confidence of her glance, the calm suggestion that she was, and knew herself to be, mistress of the situation; and the very lack of haste with which she conducted the proceedings fretted his nerves strangely.

He kept himself well in hand, however, and showed no signs of irritation as she sipped her tea; and presently she put aside her cup and turned in her chair to face him more completely.

" Now I suppose you are longing to know why I sent for you, Victor ! " He instinctively distrusted the softness of her tone, and her use of his Christian name seemed to him ominous. " Well, I won't keep you in suspense. But the whole thing is a mystery, and I'm hoping you can help me to solve it."

" If you will tell me the nature of the mystery——" In spite of himself his voice was impatient, and her blue eyes narrowed like those of a cat about to spring.

" Very well." She spoke coolly. " I'll tell you at once. The mystery concerns my rope of pearls."

" Your pearls? " The opening was unexpected.

" Yes." She smiled lazily, watching him the while. " Last night I asked Miss Rivers to take care of it for me while I posed in one of the pictures. She did so, but unfortunately forgot to return them, and went away wearing them round her neck."

" Well? "

" Well? " She mimicked him delicately.

" I mean—what if Miss Rivers did go home with your pearls? I suppose she returned them to you this morning? "

" Yes." She sat upright, her blue eyes glittering, and now her pose reminded him of the traditional attitude of the snake before it strikes. " She returned them to me this morning, after a somewhat inexplicable delay."

Romney stared at her in amazement; and she gazed back at him calmly, a little smile on her beautiful mouth.

" Lady Lucia, I don't know what you mean—— "

" No. But I think I can make my meaning clearer. Mr. Romney, when Miss Rivers took home my pearls last night, there were one hundred and nineteen on the string. This morning, on their return, the pearls numbered one hundred and twenty—one more than the correct number. Now, do you agree with me that the matter is mysterious? "

" But "—he really could not grasp her meaning—" if there are a hundred and twenty on the rope now, there must always have been a hundred and twenty. Miss Rivers wouldn't be likely to add a pearl to your necklace, would she? "

"One would hardly think so," she returned, smiling. "But the point is this. I have usually spoken of my pearls as numbering a hundred and twenty—I don't know why, except that it's a round number, and if Miss Rivers were asked how many there were on the string, she would certainly say a hundred and twenty. *Now*, do you see anything mysterious?"

"I see a lot," he replied boldly. "But I don't see anything implicating Miss Rivers in a crime, as your manner really seems to assert. In any case, wouldn't it be the simplest thing to do to ring up Miss Rivers and ask for an explanation?"

"I wonder?" She looked at him thoughtfully. "I should have done so at once, but it struck me that it would be wiser to reflect, not to act hastily in a delicate matter of this kind."

"I don't see anything particularly 'delicate,'" said Romney, coldly. "It is plainly a mistake. Now had it been the other way, had there been too few pearls on the string——"

"Ah, but that isn't quite all." She spoke calmly. "When I was quite certain of the mysterious addition to my pearls I rang up a man I know—an expert in pearls who had already seen and admired my string—and asked him to come to see me. You know the thing really is mysterious—one has heard, from time to time, of breeding pearls, and I believe there have been one or two authenticated instances of pearls having 'bred'; but never, I think, in circumstances like these."

"Well?" He spoke grimly.

"Well, the expert came, and examined my pearls very carefully. And in the course of his examination he discovered something else—something which had escaped my attention."

"And what was his wonderful discovery?" His voice was impatient. "Was the extra pearl a fake—or what was it?"

"He discovered"—she drawled the words insolently—"that six, at least, of the pearls were, if not exactly fakes, at least of considerably less value than my own had been. In other words, inferior pearls had been substituted, while in Miss Rivers' keeping, for my own more valuable ones."

"Impossible!" He sprang up and towered above her, his eyes blazing. "The pearls may have been changed—if you say so, I suppose they have been; but not while Miss Rivers had the rope in her possession."

"Unfortunate the fact is beyond doubt," she said languidly. "I was showing my pearls to a friend the previous afternoon—Major Cardew and his brother, both of whom are connoisseurs in precious stones, and naturally any flaw would have been noticed at once. No. They were intact when they left my possession last night."

"Your maid——"

"Has been with me for ten years. And as it happens she did not handle them at all yesterday after I had shown them to my friends."

"But you don't mean that you believe—seriously—that Miss Rivers had any hand in the substitution?" He was trying to speak calmly, though his anger nearly choked him.

"Why not?" She gazed at him with apparent frankness. "Even girls of Valerie's position have been known to succumb to temptation before now——"

"Temptation? What do you mean?"

"I mean"—she spoke significantly, and every word dropped like a lump of lead on his spirit—"it is well known that Miss Rivers plays bridge for high stakes, and that on more than one occasion she has lost large sums of money at the card-table [illegible]

"What d[illegible]an by large sums of money?" His tone was peremptory.

"What I say." She spoke insolently. "At least—perhaps you don't consider a hundred pounds a large sum to lose at a sitting; but to a girl of Valerie's age it is a fair amount."

"When did Miss Rivers lose a hundred pounds?"

"One night in the spring, at Mrs. van Ralton's house. It was not quite a hundred—about eighty, I believe. Oh, she paid it, I understand, though I don't know how her allowance could bear such a strain! But she has been unlucky since, on several occasions; and when the card-fever grips one, it is always hard to say what the outcome will be."

"Let's get this thing straight," he said roughly. "Are you insinuating that Miss Rivers stole your pearls in order to get money to pay her gambling debts?"

"Well, I hardly know what to say," she temporised sweetly. "One doesn't like to think such things of one's friends——"

"Don't be a hypocrite." Again he spoke unadvisedly. "You know well enough that you are no friend to that child. God only knows how you can bring yourself even to dream of suspecting her of a deliberate theft; but at least you needn't pretend friendship while you do it."

In Lucia's sapphire eyes burned a flame of rage which should have warned him of the necessity of caution. With every word he spoke he was harming the cause of the girl he championed. But he was too angry to be discreet; and Lucia's attitude was, to him, monstrous and unforgivable.

"Well, friends or not, I must have my pearls back." Her voice, for the first time, was openly hostile. "I'm willing to hush the matter up, for Sir Eric's sake; but at the same time I am not prepared to suffer a loss of this kind without some compensation."

"Have you questioned Miss Rivers?"

"Not yet. As I told you, there was an inexplicable delay in the return of my pearls this morning; and when, finally, Valerie brought them round her manner was confused. But I didn't attach much importance to that at the time."

"Well, what steps do you intend to take?" His voice rang coldly. "Miss Rivers does not, apparently, know of your suspicions, and until she does she has no means of clearing herself from them."

"No. And that is why I sent for you." She read surprise in his face. "My suggestion is this. You are a friend of Valerie's, and it might be possibly for you to question her, discreetly, of course, as to the reason for the delay in returning the pearls. It is possible she may have mislaid them—even lost them in the street last night, and has not dared to admit the fact."

"That is quite possible," he said, with an instant lightening of his face. "Naturally Miss Rivers would wish to conceal the loss as long as possible, and in the meantime the things may have been picked up by someone—some Arab thief——"

"Who removed the pearls he fancied, substituted others, and returned the string to Miss Rivers when he had finished with them." As she spoke, sweetly, he saw the absurdity of the supposition. "No. I fear that idea will not hold water for a moment."

"Then what do you believe?" His tone was stern.

She shrugged her shoulders aggravatingly.

"Don't ask me conundrums in that tone, Victor, please. I really don't know what to believe. "But"—she paused, and when she resumed her voice was significant—"I will wait till to-morrow morning before taking action. If by that time nothing has come to light, well, I must see what is best to be done."

"But why on earth don't you ask Miss Rivers straight out? It seems to me a rotten thing to do, to leave her under the shadow of an accusation without giving her the opportunity of denying the charge."

"But——" She rose suddenly, and coming up to Victor as he stood, implacably, by the table, she put both her jewelled hands on his shoulders and looked into his face with her wonderful eyes. "Victor, don't you see, I'm *afraid* to ask the child? Because, in spite of myself—I fear—I fear she has done this thing."

She had sunk her voice until it sounded like the cooing of a dove. Her softly-tinted face was close to his, her sapphire eyes gazed into his with a melting tenderness, her mouth, with its beautiful curves, was alluring as the mouth of a lovely enchantress; the pressure of her hands was alluring too, the hands of a sorceress who played with men's hearts as a juggler with his balls.

Yet to Victor Romney all these things meant nothing, less than nothing. Lovely though she was, Lucia Holland had no power to weave a spell about this man; and it was with an exclamation almost of anger that he took her hands from his shoulders and stepped back until there was a perceptible distance between them.

"If you fear that," he said, and his voice was ice, "there's nothing more to be said. You'd better go and get it over. Only, when Miss Rivers' innocence is proved, you in your turn will have to bear the brunt."

"Is that a threat?" She spoke quietly, but her eyes were angry. Then, with a sudden change of mood, she approached him again with one hand held out appealingly. "Victor, don't look at me, don't speak to me like that, as though we were enemies. Listen to me for a moment. Of course I don't want to prove the child guilty of theft. And I was suggesting that you should find out, very diplomatically, if she had had an accident, had lost the pearls, or something of the sort. If you like to try, I will wait till I hear from you. Don't please think I want to make a fuss. The pearls are valuable, but I'll bear the loss if necessary. Only, if Valerie is really innocent, it will do no harm for the thief to be discovered. You see my point, don't you?"

"Yes." He took a step in the direction of the door. "I do. And I'll stake my life on the girl's absolute ignorance of the substitution. I'll see what I can do—to-night."

"You will go to the flat?"

"No. I'm meeting Miss Rivers at dinner this evening."

"Will you come back and tell me if you have learned anything?" She had sat down again and now spoke half-absently, smoothing out her gloves on her knee. "I'll be in at—let me see—eleven. Will you be able to get away then?"

"Yes. But"—he stood for a second looking at her irresolutely—"it's only a forlorn hope, you know. Ten to one I shan't dare to mention the subject—shan't dare to insult the girl by mentioning it. Of course. I know beforehand what the answer will be; and it's only in order to prove to you what a mistake you are making that I take it on at all."

"That's good enough," she said indifferently. "Now I must really go and dress, so shall we say *au revoir?* I'll expect you again—at eleven."

When Victor Romney saw Valerie that evening his heart seemed to turn over in his breast at the appearance of utter exhaustion which she presented.

In her white chiffon frock she looked like a wraith—the ghost of the girl he knew. Beneath her honey-coloured hair her face was like chalk, drained of every drop of colour. Her brown eyes were heavy, and round them violet shadows spoke eloquently of a sleepless night. Her lips, too, were colourless, and about her whole person there was an air of absolute extinction, as though the flame of life burned too low within her to throw out even a flicker of vitality.

In truth Valerie was almost at the end of her endurance.

The strain of the last week, culminating in the sale of the emerald ring, and the subsequent shock when she found herself unable to return Lucia's pearls at the owner's request, had worn her down completely. And now there was the dread of discovery hanging over her—the discovery of her nocturnal visits to Rossi's Villa, mingled with the even more horrible fear that she might after all be forced to marry the Italian. And—as though that were not enough, there was the sudden awakening to the truth—the real reason why marriage with Rossi seemed a hundred times worse than death would be.

For she knew, too late, that all her love was given to Victor Romney; and although she could not help realising that more than once his manner had been that of a lover, she told herself now that she could never be Victor's wife. Even though he spoke to her, in ignorance of her dealings with Rossi, she would not dare to answer him as her heart dictated; and it was a thousand times more probable that did he hear of her folly he would at once relinquish all idea of asking her to marry him.

And so even the love which in happier circumstances should have been her pride was now only an additional burden to the load she carried.

It was small wonder that when she was dressed for the dinner party her uncle looked at her in absolute dismay.

"Why, Val, what's wrong with you? You look dreadfully washed out and done up. You're not fit to go out to dinner—you'd better stay at home and let me make your excuses."

"No, Uncle Eric, please let me come." She felt she could not bear a lonely evening in the flat.

"Well, I honestly think you'd be better in bed, Val." Sir Eric was emphatic. "I hope you're not going down with anything? You are careful about having your drinking water boiled?"

"Oh, yes." She tried to smile. "Please let me come with you. I've got a new frock, you know, and I must go and show it!"

He looked at her again, still dissatisfied.

"Well, if you really want to go you may, but I shall get the doctor to look you over to-morrow. I don't like your looks, Val, and I believe I'll have to send you home after all."

She said no more, but turned away to pick up her wrap; and a thought struck Sir Eric.

"See here, Val, this is an opportunity for you to wear your poor mother's pearls. Run and put them on, will you? That little pendant of yours is pretty, but a bit schoolgirlish for to-night."

To please him she acquiesced immediately, and he little knew the effort it cost her to fasten the pearls round her slim white throat. For pearls, to Valerie, would always be associated with the things she longed, ardently, to forget.

She was not Victor's partner at the dinner party, falling to the share of a young man in the Irrigation Department; but from the other side of the table Victor watched her closely from time to time, and he saw that it was all she could do to respond to her partner's sallies.

Victor himself had plenty to occupy his thoughts. The pact he had made with Lucia Holland weighed on his spirits, for he could not see how he was to introduce the subject of the stolen pearls to Valerie. And yet he could not help feeling that if the theft were to be mentioned at all, it would come better from him than from some less interested speaker; and he was hoping, with all the force of his nature, that a word or two from Valerie would prove her entire ignorance of the fraud which had, apparently, been perpetrated; in which case he intended to drop the matter at once, and return to Lady Lucia with the glad tidings.

After dinner there was a move into the music room, for the hostess, Mrs. Calcott, was a noted singer; and her parties invariably ended in a more or less impromptu concert.

The room was large and lofty, with a polished floor upon which were set groups of light gilt chairs, with here and there a low divan piled with cushions in divers colours; and as the guests streamed in, augmented by many who had come solely for the music, Victor looked round eagerly for Valerie, intending to make an opportunity for a little private conversation.

At first he could not find her, and wondered, rather uneasily, whether she had already left the house. But as the first notes of a duet for 'cello and piano sounded from the platform he saw her, sitting in the shadows at the far end of the long room, close to a door which opened into a glassroofed lounge filled with flowers. Her eyes were closed, and she was leaning back in her chair with an air of complete lassitude which wrung his heart; and although, in obedience to an unwritten law, Victor stood where he was until the players had finished, he lost no further time in making his way to the end of the room, where he sank into a chair by Valerie's side almost before she had realised his intention.

"That's better!" He turned to her quietly. "I've been wanting to speak to you all the evening, but I've only just found you, tucked away in this corner."

"I'm so tired." She spoke in a low, finished voice. "I came here to be quiet. . . ."

"Would you rather I left you?" His voice was very gentle. "But I'll promise not to talk—and I shall keep other people away!"

"Oh, don't go." She spoke quickly. "I didn't mean it for you—I'm sorry if I was rude."

"You look dreadfully tired," he said. "But don't bother to talk or listen. Just lean back and close your eyes, and I won't let anyone worry you."

Rather to his surprise she obeyed him; and as her white eyelids fell he was struck afresh by the pallor and weariness of her face. Her attitude, as she lay back in the chair, betokened more than ordinary fatigue; and he watched her in perplexity as she sat beside him in silence.

A golden voice came to them softly down the immense room singing Orfeo's appeal to Eurydice; and as the beautiful, haunting music went on, Victor, watching Valerie, saw two tears steal out from under the closed lids which hid the tragic eyes.

And the sight of those tears filled Victor with a very passion of pity. The girl he loved was in trouble; and as yet, having no clue to her distress, he could do nothing to help her. But it was not possible to stand aloof, to let her suffer unaided; and as the distant voice sang on, beautifully, Victor told himself that come what might he would find some way of helping the unhappy girl beside him.

For the moment even love was swallowed up in pity; and when, the song ended, Valerie opened her eyes and sat upright, Victor took a sudden resolve.

"Miss Rivers, shall we go and sit in the lounge through here? It's not so well lighted as this room. and you can rest your eyes, and not bother about anyone. Do come, will you? There's a big couch, and you can lie back and be quite comfy, and I won't disturb you a bit."

He rose as he spoke and held out his hand to help her to rise. He thought afterwards that if he had not done so she would have refused; but as it was she was taken by surprise and obeyed him without demur.

A minute later they were in the lounge, a charming place, with a floor tiled with Persian tiles, and here and there a rug, a few low chairs, and in the centre a great stand which was a mass of flowers. The couch was in reality a huge divan; and Valerie sank into its depths with a sigh of relief.

"How lovely!" She leaned her head back on a cushion and closed her eyes. "I believe I shall go to sleep here! But, Mr. Romney, you're missing the music. Won't you go and listen to it?"

"No, we can hear it quite well." Indeed, the notes of Mrs. Calcott's voice were plainly audible. "I'd rather stop here with you. But—Miss Rivers, forgive me if I am impertinent—are you in any trouble that you look so pale—so tired?"

Instantly she was on the alert; and as she sat upright, a crimson flush staining her pallor, he told himself that he had blundered already.

"What do you mean? If I look pale it's because"—she was searching her mind desperately for excuse—"because I was late last night, and—I've been out so much lately."

"I see." He spoke gravely. "But"—suddenly he cast caution to the winds—"Valerie, are you sure that's all? Isn't there any way I can help you? I—I think I could, if you would tell me what really is the matter. And I wouldn't say a word to anyone unless you gave me leave."

For a moment she stared at him, so plainly aghast that he cursed himself for a clumsy imbecile. Then, without any warning, she broke down utterly.

"Oh, don't—don't!" Her voice filled him with horror. "Don't ask me that—to-night! I—I can't bear it!"

With an impetuous movement she turned and buried her face in the great cushions of the divan, and he saw that she was crying. And suddenly a great fear awoke in his heart

—a fear which he would fain have strangled at its birth, since to harbour it for a moment was a treachery to the girl he loved.

The next moment he had cast the unworthy fear from him, and his voice was full of reassurance as he spoke to her.

"Miss Rivers, please don't cry. Of course I won't ask you anything you don't want to answer. Please dry your eyes and forget what I said. Honestly my only thought was to help you, and if you don't want me to speak, I won't. But"—for a second his voice was tender—"don't—don't cry; you break my heart when you cry like that!"

For a moment his appeal went unanswered, and he wondered, uneasily, how long their solitude would remain unbroken. Then, as a burst of applause testified the appreciation of the audience to the song they had heard, Valerie stirred, and sitting up, her face turned aside from him, said rather haltingly:

"Mr. Romney, I'm awfully sorry—but I've been so—so worried and unhappy. And no one can help me—that's the worst of it all"

"But are you sure?"

"Quite sure," she told him dreamily. "I've been a fool, and I must abide by my folly. Only—I don't see, even now, what else I could have done."

Unconscious of the dread which her words brought to the man who listened, she went on again presently, catching her breath in a little sob from time to time.

"If only I had know—long ago—what I was doing! Or—if I'd never come to Cairo at all! But it's done now, and I can't think how it's going to end!"

As she spoke she put up her hand to her throat, as though to stifle the sobs which still shook her; and the next instant the pearl necklace she wore fell with a soft little flop on to the knees of her chiffon frock. The clasp had worn loose—possibly it had required a little attention after its long seclusion—and Valerie's touch had caused the pearls to fall from her throat; but as they slid from her knee to the ground Romney knew that this was the opportunity for which he had been looking.

Picking up the string, he handed it back to the trembling girl; and his voice was unruffled as he said pleasantly:

" The clasp of your necklace must be loose, Miss Rivers. And you don't want to lose your pearls, do you? Though I suppose they are not as valuable as Lady Lucia's ! "

To his surprise she made no attempt to touch the necklace; and he saw that she was staring in front of her with dilated eyes.

" Oh, don't mention pearls—hers, at least. . . ." She turned to him and her cheeks were crimson. " I wish to heaven I had never seen Lady Lucia's pearls ! "

Her voice was almost a cry; and again Victor's heart contracted within him with a great fear—and a greater pity.

" But why not? " He felt like a murderer as he questioned her, but he told himself that it must be done. " What are Lady Lucia—or her pearls—to you? I know you carried them off last night, but "—he tried to laugh—" you returned them all right this morning, didn't you? "

He was unprepared for her reception of his pleasantry. She started up from her seat, and her eyes were terrified.

" What do you mean? How do you know I took them away with me? And who told you I had returned them this morning? "

" Lady Lucia told me." He spoke steadily, with a smile. " She laughed over it, of course, knowing they were all right with you, though she did say once she wondered—had begun to wonder—if anything had happened to them."

" She wondered if—— "

" Oh, she was only joking ! She knew they were in your keeping all right ! That is—you didn't lose them on the way home, of course ! "

" What do you mean, Mr. Romney? " She had regained some measure of calm, and spoke quietly now. " Why should I lose them? Did—did Lady Lucia imagine I had lost them? But—why should she imagine such a thing? "

" I don't know." He was wondering all the time why the mere supposition should have the power to agitate her so strongly. " But the pearls are valuable, and I suppose she likes to have them in her own keeping. They might so easily be stolen, you know, or—or anything might happen. But since they were in your keeping all night—— "

" But they weren't—— "

She stopped, plainly aghast at her own involuntary confession; and Victor's heart grew heavy as lead as he realised the meaning of her words.

"Then—Valerie, where were they?" Unconsciously his voice was stern; and the girl quivered from head to foot.

"I can't tell you." She spoke in so low a tone he could hardly catch the words. "Don't ask me—it's no use. And since Lady Lucia has got them back——"

Suddenly she broke off and clutched his arm with two trembling hands.

"She has got them—I gave them to her myself. And they are all right, aren't they? I mean—they aren't—aren't damaged or anything?"

Suddenly the conviction came to Victor that subterfuge was useless. Although she had certainly had no hand in the substitution of the pearls, all the facts pointed to the possibility that she knew something of the matter, something which had caused her, was causing her, terrible uneasiness; and it seemed to him that the only way of clearing up the whole horrible affair was to speak openly.

"There *was* something odd about the pearls when they were returned." He spoke slowly. "First of all, there were too many on the rope——"

"*Too many?*" Her voice was incredulous.

"Yes. There were one hundred and twenty, whereas there should only have been one hundred and nineteen."

"Oh, no, no!" Her exclamation was involuntary. "There were always a hundred and twenty—Lady Lucia told me so herself!"

A cold hand seemed to clutch at Victor's heart as she spoke. The coincidence was disturbing, to say the least; and when he went on his voice was almost apprehensive

"Not only that, but some of the pearls, six or seven of them, had been removed; and other, less valuable ones substituted for them."

"The pearls stolen—oh, no, no!" Her voice was a whisper. "They *couldn't* be—it—it's not possible!"

"I'm afraid it's true, all the same," he said steadily. "And now that we know the pearls were not in your keeping last night it will doubtless be easy to trace the—the thief."

She was staring at him as he spoke; and at the last words she fell back, still staring, one hand grasping the folds of her chiffon frock above the heart.

"No—no." She spoke with difficulty. "You can't—you can't trace the thief. Besides—I wasn't speaking the truth. I never parted with the pearls. They were in my room—on my table—all night."

The lie was obvious, and his heart yearned over her the more for her pitiful attempt at subterfuge.

"No, Valerie." He hardly noticed his own use of her name. "They weren't in your room. Someone else had them—I don't know who it was until you tell me, but then——"

"I can't tell you—I could never tell you!" She was unconscious of her admission; and he looked at her compassionately.

"Valerie, can't you trust me? Who had the pearls last night? Did you lose them—or were you terrorised by some ruffian into giving them up?"

"No." She forced her white lips to speech. "No one forced me, and I—I didn't lose them. Oh, can't you see I can tell you nothing?"

"But naturally Lady Lucia is anxious to know where her pearls have gone," he told her gently. "And if you could give me any clue I expect I could get the matter settled without any bother, or—or publicity."

"Wait a moment," she said suddenly. "Are you *certain* the pearls—some of them—are gone from the string?"

"Unfortunately yes. And unless you will help me, Valerie, I don't see what I am to do."

"I can't help you." She spoke tonelessly. "I can never, never tell you who had the pearls last night. If Lady Lucia thinks I stole them, I must go to prison, that's all. But I can say nothing, *nothing* about last night."

"There is no question of prison," he said gently. "No one suspects you—why should they? All we want is to clear up the matter, and if you will tell me a little more I think I can help you through."

She looked at him again; and he was startled by the despair in her eyes.

"I am grateful, very grateful, to you, Mr. Romney. And if I could tell you everything, all my folly—my criminal folly"—the word made him wince—"I would. But it is no use. No one can help me—you least of all!"

"No, that's not true." He had taken a resolution while she spoke. "If anyone can help you, I can. And I want you to give me the right. You must have seen by this time that I——"

"Oh, stop—for God's sake stop!" Her voice was rough with feeling. "Don't go on—oh, don't! You don't know what you're doing—and I can't listen. I haven't the right. And—oh, help me to get away from here! I can't stand any more—to-night!"

With an almost frantic gesture she snatched the pearl necklace from the couch where it lay, and turned blindly towards an inner door, leading, as Victor knew, to the hall without. Hastening after her, he laid his hand on her shoulder rather imperiously.

"Miss Rivers, listen to me. You can't go, looking like that. You must pull yourself together and dry your eyes, or people will begin to wonder what has happened. Now if you'll sit down here a moment and get calm, I'll go and tell your uncle you would like to go home. You can get out this way, and we'll send for your wraps. But you'll try to control yourself, won't you? You know if you cry like that you'll make yourself really ill, and everyone will wonder what's wrong!"

While he talked she was trying her hardest to calm herself; and as he led her to a chair she pulled out a tiny handkerchief and attempted to dry her eyes. Seeing that the danger of collapse was over, Victor wasted no more time, but went in search of Sir Eric, who, on being informed that his niece was tired, was full of solicitude in her behalf.

Five minutes later Valerie and her uncle drove away from the house in the latter's car; and as he stood bare-headed on the steps and watched the motor glide away down the quiet road, Victor told himself uncomfortably that here were all the elements of tragedy.

That there was a mystery connected with the pearls was very evident. And that Valerie knew, or at least guessed, the identity of the thief was plain to see. And though every nerve in his body rebelled at the mere idea that Valerie had acted in any way dishonourably, Victor could not but realise that she was in an invidious position.

Again and again the question would assert itself—if she had not had the pearls all night, in whose keeping were they? And, supposing her to know in whose possession they had spent the night, was it credible that she knew nothing of the substitution?

She had of course been culpably foolish in handing the pearls entrusted to her to anyone else; but that she was a party to the fraud Victor entirely refused to believe.

He was so heavily handicapped by the girl's own attitude. If she would not speak plainly, it would be very difficult for him to help her, since he was necessarily working in the dark.

Lady Lucia had hinted that Valerie lost money at bridge, which she found difficulty in repaying; and it was evident that she suspected the girl of stealing the pearls for the sake of their value. But although Victor realised plainly the plausibility of Lucia's suspicions he told himself passionately that Valerie was innocent of any underhand dealing. That she had been foolish he was ready to admit; but he would stake his life that no fraud was mingled with her folly.

Yet it was going to be very hard to convince Lady Lucia of the girl's complete innocence in the matter. After all, the necklace *had* been tampered with while, ostensibly, in Valerie's keeping; and if once trained minds were brought to bear on the problem, probably the detection of the thief would follow.

And that must not happen.

He did not know, yet, how it was to be prevented; but he knew very well, as he set out to keep his appointment with Lucia, that he was prepared to do anything, to pay any price, to make any sacrifice, to prevent Lucia taking any action which might involve Valerie in trouble or—the word *would* recur—or disgrace. And he would lie boldly, would perjure himself a thousand times, sooner than let Valerie suffer.

Yet as he walked along he knew he would have to act warily, for he was in reality as much in the dark as Lady Lucia. Only, whereas she was actuated, surely, by selfish motives, his motives were pure. And he told himself desperately that he would, he *must* prevail—or see the girl he loved go down to suffering, and, perhaps, shame, before his eyes.

But he had no conception of the price he was to be called upon, presently, to pay.

## XIX

"WELL, you have seen Valerie? And what has she to say about the matter?"

Lady Lucia was waiting for Victor when he arrived at the Savoy at eleven o'clock; and the moment he saw her he prepared, instinctively, for trouble.

Lucia also had been dining out, and her gown was a marvel of the dressmaker's art. Generally she wore black at night, realising its value in setting off the exquisite, creamy texture of her skin, the glory of her burnished hair; but to-night she was in purple chiffon, a frock like the petals of a pansy. Her beautiful arms were bare from the shoulder, the frock held up by straps of velvet, and on her breast a great ruby glowed with an almost baneful fire. With her milky throat, her wonderful complexion, her splendid eyes like two sapphires between their ebony lashes, Lucia Holland looked a very enchantress of men to-night; and the moment Romney saw her he braced himself for conflict, for he knew instinctively that she was putting forth all the weapons of her extraordinary beauty to bind him to her will.

Standing before her, very tall and unbending, he answered quietly.

"I have seen Miss Rivers, yes. And, as I guessed, she knew nothing about the matter."

For a moment Lucia looked at him silently. Then she said, with an inflection of curiosity in her tone:

"I don't think I understand. You mean she knew nothing of the—substitution? But that's impossible. She *must* have known."

"She knew nothing," he repeated steadily. "As I told you earlier, it was a sheer absurdity to suppose she would know anything."

Lucia looked up at him from her seat, and her eyes were unfathomable.

"In that case there is no need to consider her further in the matter. Plainly the pearls were stolen from her, and returned without her knowledge—while she was asleep probably. Therefore I can report my loss to the authorities with an easy mind, since Valerie can so easily clear herself of any suspicion."

As she spoke Victor was seeking desperately for a solution to the problem which now confronted him. He knew, only too well, that should inquiries be made, Valerie must certainly be involved; and although he was as yet far from suspecting the truth, he could not but realise that an inquiry was the last thing which Valerie desired.

"I suppose"—he spoke slowly—"you couldn't wait a little longer? I mean, something might turn up, you might get a clue. And if you act in a hurry——"

She looked at him again, and now there was an inscrutable smile in her blue eyes.

"Seeing the discovery is already twelve hours old, I can hardly be said to have acted hastily. And I've always understood that in cases like these it's best to strike while the iron is hot. So I think I'd really better ring up the authorities—or shall I begin with Sir Eric?"

She stretched out one beautiful arm towards the table beside her, on which the telephone stood; and instantly Victor knew that she must not be allowed to make the loss public yet.

Starting forward he laid his hand peremptorily on her white arm.

"No, Lady Lucia, don't 'phone yet. It—it would be a pity—I mean, there is no need for haste. Let us—let us talk over the matter first."

She looked at him reflectively for a moment without speaking. Then she let her arm fall to her side, and patted the sofa beside her invitingly.

"As you will, Victor. But you alarm me, standing there like a great stone image. Come and sit here, and we will talk the matter over to your heart's content."

Scarcely knowing what he did he moved to the couch and sat down, Lucia drawing aside her purple skirts as he did so with a little smile which it was well he did not see.

"Now." Her voice was soft. "Let us talk. To begin with, you say Miss Rivers knows nothing of the theft, yet you are strangely anxious that I shall not notify her uncle, nor the authorities. I wonder what reason you have for reluctance?"

"No reason at all," he said boldly. "Except that you don't want to rush the thing. To begin with, are you certain the pearls are gone?"

He had forgotten that he had asked the question before; but she remembered, and smiled as she replied to it.

"As certain as I am that you and I sit here to-night."

"Then—mayn't they have been substituted since you got the necklace back? Didn't you perhaps leave them lying about?"

"No. Since they were returned they have never been out of my sight." She looked at him mockingly. "Facts are facts, my friend; and the fact remains that the pearls were stolen while in Valerie's charge. And though I don't say she herself stole them, I do say that she must know something about the theft."

"Don't say that, Lucia—for God's sake don't say that!" His voice was harsh, and he sprang up, regardless of the hand she laid, detainingly, on his arm. Seeing persuasion was useless she too sprang up and faced him with a flame of blue fire in her eyes.

"Why not? Why shouldn't I say it? If the girl is a thief, as I begin to believe, she ought to be punished!" She spoke angrily, vindictively. "It's not fair, either, to let her go about if she's not responsible for her actions—a kleptomaniac, perhaps! It's evident she ought to be in prison—or in a home! I'm to lose my pearls, to have them stolen from me by an unscrupulous girl, and to say nothing about it! I must say you have a pretty notion of fairness, Victor! I'm to suffer loss, and she is to be allowed to go scot free!"

"Be quiet, Lucia." He gripped her arm authoritatively. "Miss Rivers has no more to do with the theft of your pearls than I have. They were stolen without her knowledge——"

"In that case she ought to be as glad to have the matter cleared up as I myself." She tore herself away. "And I shall take steps at once—at once, do you hear? It's no use talking, for my mind is made up. And if you won't help me to get back my pearls, I must just do it without you, that's all."

With a groan Victor turned away, realising that he was helpless, handicapped as he was by Valerie's refusal to speak —a refusal which he could not but guess covered some secret knowledge; and with a feeling of physical nausea he sank down on the coach and covered his eyes with his hands to shut out the picture of that beautiful, terrible figure in the pansy-coloured gown. Sick at heart he waited, impotently, for the whirr of the telephone as Lucia got into communication with the Exchange; but it did not come, and after a moment he looked up to discover the cause of her delay, and found her standing in an attitude of meditation beside the table.

Unwilling to watch her, he covered his eyes again; but to his immense and most unwelcome surprise two soft hands drew his hands gently away from his face, and as he regained his vision he found Lucia Holland kneeling before him, a marvellous, alluring, exquisite figure in her purple draperies, the great ruby flashing on her white breast. Gone was the beautiful fury of a moment earlier, gone the hard, implacable figure who clamoured for justice and sought redress. Instead here was a woman all melting lure, all softness and femininity, a woman whose lips, so near his own, seemed to invite a lover's kisses, whose eyes like two blue stars gazed into his in a very passion of wistful tenderness.

"Victor"—her very voice was altered—"don't be so harsh, so unforgiving. Don't you know you have only to ask me—kindly!—to let the matter drop, and I will let my pearls vanish for ever without a word? I don't care if that girl has stolen them or not, so long as you are kind to me. Kiss me, Victor—tell me you love me, you want my love—and what do jewels matter?"

Aghast, horrified to the very core of his being, Victor stared at her; and the repulsion in his gaze shook her into an absolute fury of rage. Yet she controlled herself magnificently; and when she spoke again her voice was still caressing.

"Ah, don't look surprised, Victor! You know I love you—have loved you so long—since those first days when you made me think you meant something by your words, your glances. Oh, I know you were hard, cruel—when you had won my love you threw me over for all the world to see. You never thought of the tortures I endured—slighted, cast off, I, Lucia Holland, treated like some little shopgirl of whom you had tired. . . ."

Her eyes gazed into his with a world of love in their depths. Her white hands tightened their hold on his shoulders, her face was close to his, from the purple chiffon veiling her white breast was shaken a waft of some exotic perfume—and with a feeling of absolute terror Victor realised what she was doing, understood with fatal clearness of comprehension that she was offering to make a bargain with him, offering to let the matter of the pearls slip into oblivion if in return he would bend to her will, would give her the satisfaction she sought, whether in revenge or in genuine love he could not have said.

And he knew that he ought not to be called upon to make so infamous a choice.

With a movement almost of panic he sprang up impetuously; and so sudden was his gesture that Lucia fell helplessly against the couch, her hands grasping desperately at its cushions to steady herself.

"Lucia, for God's sake don't talk like that! You know I never gave you cause to think I loved you. You were kind to me, and I was grateful, but as God's my witness I never dreamed of loving you or asking you to love me. And I can't—I can't act a lie like this before the world!"

She had risen to her knees as he spoke, and now she sank down on the couch and looked at him for a long moment without speaking. And beneath that long gaze Romney felt horribly uneasy, for there was some element therein which he did not understand.

At last Lucia spoke; and her hearer's blood turned to ice in his veins.

"In that case there is nothing more to be said. The girl has stolen my pearls, and she must take the consequences. I don't know what they will be—but in any case it will probably be a lesson to her for the rest of her life."

"But that's absurd, monstrous!" He spoke loudly. "The girl has *not* stolen your pearls, and only you would dare to insinuate such a thing against her."

"Well, if she is not the actual thief she is an accomplice," said Lucia, coldly. "You know best how she took the matter to-night, whether she appeared to be innocent or guilty, and since you are so convinced of her innocence—— "

She broke off suddenly, for in spite of himself Romney had changed colour.

"Ah! Then her manner wasn't quite convincing after all!" She spoke mockingly now. "You're not quite, perfectly certain she knows nothing, are you, Victor? You see, if she has not stolen the pearls herself, she is mixed up with the matter; and there will be a pretty big scandal anyhow, even if Valerie escapes punishment—going to prison, or whatever the sentence might be."

"Don't speak in that flippant way," he said sternly. "Good God, what are you made of, even to think of sending that child to prison—if it were possible, which it isn't?"

"Don't be too sure," she returned cynically. "You forget that my pearls are famous. They're known everywhere, and they are insured for a big sum. By the way"—she stopped as though struck by a sudden thought—"the insurance company would want to take a hand, wouldn't they? I mean, they wouldn't pay up unless they were sure the thing had been properly investigated. So I'm afraid there is nothing for it but to take action at once."

"You mean you are going to make the matter public, to involve Miss Rivers, her uncle, all her family in a scandal? Of course the girl can prove her innocence, but—it's possible she has been intimidated into acting foolishly"—he hated himself for the suggestion—"and in any case there will be an endless fuss."

"Quite so." She had risen now, and her eyes had lost their melting softness and were hard as two blue stones. "But that's not my affair. I've been robbed, and I mean to be righted. So, once more, I will see about setting the machinery in action."

"Wait a moment, Lucia." He stepped forward and barred her progress. "Let's get this thing right. You intend to call in the authorities, to tell them your story, mentioning Miss Rivers' name as the custodian of your pearls last night. You're going to do this, knowing perfectly well that suspicion will be cast upon Valerie, which she may find difficulty in refuting; and you propose to stand by while she and her friends are made the centre of a scandal which will take years to die down. That is so, isn't it?"

"Yes." She looked at him steadily. "That is so. Unless——"

"There is an alternative then?" But already he guessed what it was to be.

"Yes." Suddenly her whole face melted, was transformed from a granite mask into a lovely quivering picture. She came towards him swiftly and laid her hand rather timidly on his arm. "Oh, Victor, don't make me do this thing! You know I love you; I've gloried in showing you how much. I've thrown aside pride, I've forgiven you for the wrong you did me, I've done all I can to show you what you are to me. Well, can't you love me just a little? I'm not hideous, repulsive! Look at me, Victor—I'm worth loving . . . all the men I meet are ready to make love to me if I give them the least opening, but I only love you—you! And if you can't, or won't love me in return, I don't care what I do, or what becomes of me!"

There was no doubt she was in earnest. Actress though she was she was not acting now. For it was true that she loved him, as women of her type do love; and for him she was ready to sacrifice her pride, her reticence, all her inherited traditions of womanhood. That her love would eventually destroy them both was possible enough. But now there was something splendid in its flame, something of the essential purity of fire. And even Victor, his whole soul wrapped up in another woman, was shaken by the intensity of the passion which so plainly possessed her.

She was quick to see that she had moved him, and her voice now was softer, more seductive than before.

"Victor, say you love me, and the girl shall go free. What are pearls to your love? Why, I'll give them away—to my maid, to the beggar who lies outside the Mosque of Mahomet Ali—only say you will love me, that you will make me your wife, and all this trouble shall be forgotten!"

Her voice broke, and she turned away her face as though for once her wonderful poise had deserted her. And the quiver in her tone, the half-shy turning away of her gaze pleaded her cause more eloquently than she knew. For even Victor could not remain quite unmoved beneath that self-revelation; and though there was not the slightest affection for her in his thoughts he could not but acknowledge that in her surrender she was superb.

Yet the alternative was too hard. And with the memory of her new-born gentleness upon him he turned to her in impetuous appeal.

"Lucia"—he caught her by the shoulders and turned her to face him again—"don't do this thing. If you love me—and God knows I'm nothing much to love—then be merciful, for my sake. If you will—if you'll let the matter drop and say nothing about it I'll be grateful to you for the rest of my life. Lucia, you could be such a splendid woman if you would. God didn't make you so lovely without giving you beauty in your soul, and now's the chance to prove how magnificent you are. Oh, Lucia, for the sake of our old friendship, for the sake of the friendship there might be between us in the years to come, be merciful now. Have pity, Lucia! Valerie may have done wrong—God knows I'm as much in the dark as you are—but she's so young—only a child, at the beginning of her life——"

He had struck a false note. Until this moment Lucia had stood silent, swayed by a dozen emotions among which, surely, pity had held its place. But with the mention of Valerie's name her face grew dark with anger and she tore herself away from his embrace with a finality there was no mistaking.

"My God, Victor, what a fool you are—oh, what a fool!" She fell back a step, panting with rage, and he stood aghast. "What is your Valerie to me? Young, is she? Not too young to gamble, to take money from men, to let a *roué* make love to her——"

In her turn she had gone too far. Beside the cold fury in Victor's face her anger dwindled to nothing—a child's petulance.

"Take care, Lucia." Victor was seeing red. "You have vilified Miss Rivers before to-night, but even you may not say things like this. Take money from men—my God, you deserve to be struck dead for taking that infamous lie on your lips!"

"It's no lie!" She faced him boldly. "Months ago Rossi paid her debts—oh, I know what I'm talking about, for she lost a large sum of money at Mrs. van Ralton's one night to a Captain Emary, and it was Rossi who called at his hotel and left the money which was due to him—— "

"Acting as Miss Rivers' messenger——"

"*Chi lo sa?*" She shrugged her shoulders. "Have it your own way. Well, doubtless it will all come out now, and Cairo will be provided with a sensation after its own heart."

"No," he said roughly, "it won't. For there'll be no sensation. If the price of your silence is my name, well, I'll have to pay that price."

"You mean"—suddenly her lips paled—"you mean you will marry me?"

"Yes." Never did a man look less like an accepted lover than Victor Romney as he stood before the woman who loved him. "If you demand this thing as my share of the bargain, well, I'll accept your terms."

For one moment his fate hung in the balance, unsuspected by himself. For just that one moment Lucia Holland, capricious to the last, asked herself whether the gift were one of so great price after all. What if she let him go—even Lucia was capable of strange, fleeting instincts of nobility—if she set him free, promised to let the whole matter of the stolen pearls slide into oblivion, accepting the actual, material loss it entailed without complaint!

There would be something rather splendid about this course of action, something which for a moment appealed to her wayward nature. The monetary loss would be a serious one; yet if she made up her mind to do this thing the very magnitude of the sacrifice would be oddly fascinating.

And yet——

She looked at him again; and immediately she knew that she could not make the sacrifice. She must have him; he had escaped her once, but now he must be hers, to give him up would be too hard, too impossible.

"Well, Lucia?" With a tremendous effort of will he spoke quietly. "What is your decision? Don't keep me in suspense—— "

His own words were his undoing. In spite of his attempt to speak indifferently, there was an undercurrent of anxiety, of apprehension in his tone which he could not hide, an eagerness, too, to learn his fate which concealed a real, though dreadfully faint hope, even yet, of release. . . .

And instantly all softness died out of Lucia Holland's heart; and in its place came a great and cruel satisfaction.

"I will marry you as soon as you like," she said. "And as for the pearls, I will send a note to Miss Rivers to-night to tell her I was mistaken when I fancied my necklace had been tampered with."

"A *quid pro quo,* eh?" he said with a bitterness he could not conceal. "Well, the bargain is a fair one, and I'll do my share. I suppose we had better make the engagement public?"

"Not yet." She was already sitting down at her bureau. "I would rather nothing was said of it until after the *Tableaux,* if you do not mind."

As she spoke a vision of Valerie as Atalanta flashed into Romney's tortured mind, and he stifled a groan at the remembrance. For now that this compact was made he must think no more of Valerie. He had acted for the best, had striven, whether wisely or not time would show, to render her path easy, her future safe. And although to lose her was like tearing the very heart out of his body, so closely was the thought of her entwined about his being, he could do nothing else, situated as he was, but let her go. For, and here was the crux of the whole matter, he dared not, with the memory of Valerie's outburst in his mind, let the affair of the stolen jewels come to light. He was afraid—afraid of a dozen different dangers; and it seemed to him that only in silence could safety be found.

And if he had bought that silence with a price so high that henceforward he must go bankrupt of all the treasures which life might have held, that was his own affair.

What Valerie would think he did not dare to conjecture; and although he did not for one moment believe Lucia's story as to Rossi's payment of the girl's debt, the introduction of the Italian's name seemed to add yet one more sinister feature to the whole unhappy affair.

As he stood, gazing into space with haunted blue eyes, Lucia turned from her writing table and held out to him a little white envelope, addressed and stamped.

"Will you post this on your way home?" She spoke indifferently. "And now I must really turn you out. It's shockingly late, and Rosa Hammond will wonder why I don't come to bed."

"I will post it, yes." He took the envelope, and Lucia rose, languidly, from her seat.

"Oh, but I'm tired!" She raised her beautiful arms and stretched them above her head, yawning daintily as she did so. "I may expect you to-morrow, Victor?"

"Yes." He stood for a second looking at her, and for all the wrong she had done, was still doing, him, he realised her exceptional loveliness as she faced him in her wonderful purple gown. Many men—most men, surely, would be wild with rapture to know that all that loveliness belonged, or would belong, to them. Yet to Romney this beauty was a baneful thing; and although in time custom might bring a surface affection, to-night he would have died rather than have kissed her beautiful mouth.

And Circe though Lucia Holland was, she knew that to-night her spells were valueless, the appeal of her beauty null and void. But she could wait. She had won the victory, and the fruit of it would follow in due course.

And so she held out her hand quite simply to take farewell of him; and as he took it in his he realised that to-night, at least, he was to be spared any further attempt at demonstration.

"Good-night, Victor. You will post that letter?"

"Yes. I will not forget it. Good-night."

He dropped her hand, hesitated for a moment, then went slowly out of the room. And Lucia, looking after him, wondered for one illuminating moment if the stake for which she had played, which she had won, would turn out to be only fairy gold after all.

Ten minutes later Victor posted the letter which meant so much; and as it dropped, with a little thud, into the letter-box he gave vent to a heavy, hopeless sigh.

"The *quid pro quo* . . . well, so be it. God grant I haven't made a mistake!"

And with a shrug of the shoulders and an involuntary clenching of his hands he turned away and walked for hours, alone with his thoughts, through the beauty of the mysterious Egyptian night.

## XX

THREE days later Rossi returned, unexpectedly, to Cairo.

He had of course sent word of his projected journey to Mrs. Graham, with many regrets at his own inability to take part in the entertainment; and his return was as welcome as it was unlooked-for. He explained airily that while waiting in Port Said for a boat he had received, by cable, such reassuring news of his mother's health that he had immediately resolved to postpone his journey until after the performance had taken place; and since no one was in a position to contradict him, his story went unchallenged.

Unfortunately another catastrophe threatened to befall the pictures. Miss Rivers was ill, it seemed, suffering from a kind of breakdown, attributed, by her uncle, to the fact that she had for some weeks been doing too much, riding and playing tennis by day, dancing and rehearsing at night.

By the doctor's orders she was in bed, looked after by Anna, the wife of Sir Eric's own man, who acted as cook to the household; and no one was allowed to see her, despite repeated attempts by various members of the Tableaux Committee.

In truth few girls could have come unscathed through the strain to which Valerie had been subjected; and although Dr. Dryden guessed shrewdly enough that it was her mind and not alone her body which had come to the verge of collapse, he said nothing about his own idea, and gave out that his patient had been overdoing things physically and required complete rest.

Thanks to his forethought Valerie was left in peace, lying white and still in her bed, her eyes closed, her gold hair hanging in two heavy plaits over her shoulders. She complained of nothing, only said she was tired, so tired; and she tried bravely enough to smile on her uncle when he hovered round her, full of solicitude, imploring her to eat a few grapes, drink a glass of wine, whether she felt any inclination to do so or not.

For three days Dr. Dryden left her in peace, bidding her lie quiet and think of nothing; but on the morning after Rossi's return he judged the time had come for a different mode of treatment.

He waited to make his visit until late in the morning, knowing Sir Eric would be out by noon; and when he entered his patient's room he saw with satisfaction that she was alone.

"Now, Miss Val, how are you this morning?" He sat down beside her and put his fingers on her wrist. "Better, eh? That's good, because it is high time you left off lying in bed and came back to the world again."

"Is it?" She spoke listlessly.

"I think so. You know there is nothing wrong with you, organically." He had assured himself of that beforehand. "You were simply tired out and wanted a rest. Now you've had it, and I don't think I can let you stay here any longer."

"I feel as though I could lie here for ever and ever," she said wearily. "It's so quiet, so peaceful, nothing to worry one, nothing to bother about."

"Nonsense. That's not a healthy frame of mind for a young girl. Besides, there are these grand *Tableaux* coming on immediately, and all the performers are tearing their hair over your absence."

"But I thought—some of the pictures are to be left out, aren't they? I mean—Count Rossi's not here, either."

"Oh, yes, he is; came home last night." He spoke casually, but his eyes were keen, and he saw the quick alarm which woke in her face at the disclosure.

"But his mother was ill——"

"It seems she is recovering, and he thought he would get back." Dr. Dryden was wondering whether a scrap of gossip he had heard could possibly be true. "So he has returned to play his part in the show; and it only remains for you to recover and take your share, Val!"

"Must I?" She gave a sigh and looked up at him wistfully. "Somehow the very thought of the pictures makes me feel tired out. I thought perhaps someone else would take my place."

" No, I think you must make an effort, Valerie." He had his own reasons for wishing her to appear before the world of Cairo once more. " You would disappoint so many people if you failed at the last; and if you rest quietly during the day I think you may do a little rehearsing at night. After all, it's only a matter of a few days now; and then perhaps Sir Eric could send you away for a little change, to Helouan, or even to Ramleh. There is generally someone ready to take a change of air!"

" Am I to get up now—to lunch? " She spoke rather pathetically; and his heart relented a little.

" Well, you may lie still till tea-time, if you like. But then I think you might get up and have tea with your uncle. It's very miserable for him, you know, having you laid up like this."

" Yes—poor Uncle Eric! " For a moment her pale cheeks took a tinge of colour. " I'm horribly selfish lying here, and my uncle is so good to me, I wouldn't for the world let him think me ungrateful."

" He doesn't think that, my dear." He patted her arm kindly. " Only he doesn't like to think of you lying here ill. And although I quite understand that you are feeling weak and washed out, I know you'll make an effort for his sake."

" Oh, I will, I will! " She spoke fervently. " After all, I can't lie here for ever. I shall have to get up and face things some time. So I may as well begin to-day."

" I hope you have nothing very serious to face, Valerie." His tone was rather grave. " What things are they that appear so alarming? Have you been doing anything foolish, spending your allowance too fast, or something of the kind? "

He was quick to see the fear which leaped into her brown eyes; and again the memory of the words he had heard stirred uncomfortably in his mind.

She spoke hastily.

" Oh, no, I've nothing to alarm me. I was thinking of the pictures, I suppose. But I'll get up presently, and Uncle Eric shall see I'm all right again."

He knew she was equivocating, but he could say nothing further on the subject, and he took his leave, wondering again whether there could be any foundation for the very disquieting rumour he had heard. At any rate he intended to keep it from Sir Eric as long as possible; and he hoped, fervently, that it had been but an idle rumour which would presently die down of its own accord.

Valerie's first thought, on reading Lucia Holland's letter, had been one of absolute bewilderment. Why, if the pearls had not been stolen, had Victor Romney disturbed her so dreadfully with his tale of theft? It seemed impossible that Lady Lucia should have made such a mistake, and yet she could not believe that Victor would wilfully deceive her. And the irony of the whole thing lay in the fact that by her own words she had planted the seed of suspicion in Victor's heart, had forced him by her own equivocations to believe she was holding back something of vital importance. She could not remember clearly what she had said, what damning admissions she had made; but she had been fully conscious of Victor's wonder, his half-incredulous amazement at her apparent inability to tell him a plain story.

She had felt, at the end, that she could bear no more; and that was why she had cut him short when he began to speak of other things, to beg her to accept help from him, because he had the right to offer it to her. She had clung to the idea that she must not let him speak yet, while this cloud of horror hung over her; and although she would have given all she possessed to be able to put herself and her cause into his kind, strong hands, she had felt, insistently, that she must not give in, yet, to the weakness which beset her.

Then, next morning, as she lay in bed, too tired to rise, had come Lucia's mysterious letter; and at once she had begun to look for a message from Victor, who would surely hasten to let her know that she need no longer fear trouble in the matter. But when no message came, she told herself that he would come in person during the afternoon; and although she was by no means fit to leave her bed, she had dragged herself up to await the coming of the visitor whom she felt would certainly arrive.

But Victor neither came nor wrote. And when she realised that it was useless to expect him that day, she gave in suddenly and allowed Sir Eric to send for Dr. Dryden, who ordered her to bed and spoke vaguely of overstrain, loss of stamina, and the like.

During the following days she heard nothing from Victor

Romney. She little knew what good reason he had for refraining from writing to her, since Lady Lucia's command sealed his tongue, and he would not write to Valerie as though the situation between them were unchanged. And although she made excuses for him she knew in her heart that this silence was bitterly hard to bear.

Once indeed she had news of him. Sir Eric had met him at the Club, and Victor had inquired after her health; but apparently there had been little conversation between them, and although on the same afternoon a bunch of beautiful roses, bearing his card, was left at the flat for her, she could not discover that he had even asked if she were sufficiently convalescent to see a visitor.

Rossi, on the other hand, had called on the day after his return; and although not admitted to her presence, had sent in a charming note with the gilded basket of flowers which he had deemed appropriate to the occasion, in which he expressed his distress at her indisposition, and gave her the news of his mother's unexpected rally.

A night or two later Valerie was considered well enough to take her part in one of the final rehearsals for the pictures; and as everyone she met was anxious to express his or her pleasure at seeing her among them once more, her meeting with Victor was shorn of the awkwardness with which she had expected to find it invested. He shook hands quietly with her, asking after her health in a tone which rather lacked warmth; and she felt vaguely disappointed, though, had she know how different were the circumstances of this meeting compared with the last, she would have understood that he dared not say more to her than the few courteous words which seemed to her so cold.

Rossi, however, made up for this coolness by the warmth and fervour of his greeting. Half the evening he hovered round her, screening her from the chill draughts inseparable from the huge, airy house, begging her not to fatigue herself, fetching her wine or coffee in the intervals of waiting between the pictures. Whether intentionally or not he contrived to constitute himself her cavalier so openly that other people began to smile and whisper in corners; and although Valerie was too listless to realise the fact, the eyes of the assembly were constantly turned in her direction.

She took her parts in the various pictures as well as she could; and since by now the poses were more or less mechanical, her lack of vitality was not too noticeable.

Lady Lucia, on the other han [illegible]s more radiant, more warmly human than was her wont. Her sapphire eyes gleamed, her mouth curved into delicious smiles, her whole bearing was more animated, more vivacious than usual; and her appearance as Aphrodite in the Judgment of Paris called forth hearty applause from the interested audience.

Nothing, as yet, was known of her engagement to Victor Romney; and there was nothing in their attitude towards one another which could give rise to any suspicion of the truth. Romney, indeed, went through the evening with an air of gravity, of rather aloof austerity which did not betoken any great satisfaction with the cards dealt him by the great dealer Life; and although he avoided Valerie unostentatiously, he did not single out Lady Lucia for any unusual attention.

Only once there came a significant moment.

It was just before the picture in which Romney figured as Paris; and he was standing, ready dressed, at the side of the platform, waiting for the producer to arrive, when Valerie passed by, wearing the dress in which she was to appear, later, as Charmian in the Cleopatra picture.

For a second Victor hesitated. Then he said:

“Well, Miss Rivers, do you feel pretty confident about the final show?”

She started as he spoke; and the fugitive colour flitted into her cheek. Then she answered him quietly.

“I think so. But I shan't be sorry when it's all over.”

“Nor I.” He was playing absently with the gilded apple he held. “Though on the whole I should have been sorry to have missed the affair.”

As he spoke he dropped the apple, which rolled to the girl's feet. She stooped and picked it up before he could prevent her; and for a moment she stood with it in her hand, looking at it with an expression he could not fathom.

“Is this one of those you use in—our—picture?” Her voice was low.

“Yes—Atalanta” He put out his hand to take the apple from her; and for one moment he was shaken by a wild temptation to clasp her hand in his, to draw her to him and forget honour, duty, even safety, in one delirious, golden moment.

He conquered the temptation, though the struggle turned him cold; and was in the act of taking the fruit, gently, from her, when he heard a rustle of draperies at his elbow, and looking up found Lucia beside him.

"Is that my prize—Paris?" In spite of her efforts her voice was a trifle harsh. "Surely you are not bestowing the golden apple on anyone else? Don't forget that it belongs to Aphrodite—to her alone!"

Although to Valerie the words meant little, Victor was able to read their true significance; and he turned to Lady Lucia with a steely light in his blue eyes.

"I shall not forget what is due to Aphrodite," he said coolly. "Whether a golden apple or a pound of flesh, I shall pay my debts. And if the apple gives its recipient indigestion, I am not to be held accountable for that."

Fortunately for them all M. Lammin was now heard calling for the performers; and with a murmured word Valerie left them and slipped into a corner of the green room where she need not torture herself by watching Lucia Holland's triumph.

She was puzzled by Victor's change of manner; but in her heart she hugged the warm certainty that he loved her—indeed his words on the night of their last meeting had been, almost, an avowal of that love. And she was ready to wait a little longer, preferred, indeed, to wait, in the hope that the dark cloud of intrigue might lift from her life and leave her free to listen to her lover.

Three days later the performance took place.

All Cairo, fashionable Cairo, flocked to Mrs. Graham's house on the fateful evening, and it was soon evident that the cause of the Armenians would be substantially aided.

In the whole enormous room there was hardly a chair unfilled; and the scene was decorative in the extreme, since all had combined to make the affair one of supreme brilliance.

Government, diplomacy, research, the Services, all were represented; and there were members of at least a dozen nations among the vast audience. Diamonds flashed everywhere, ribbons and orders were to be seen on every hand, for by common consent full dress had been adopted for the occasion; and the spectacle was a splendid one.

Sir Eric, of course, was present, handsome and distinguished as ever; and as Valerie perched on the arm of his chair for a moment before leaving him to seek the green room, she told herself passionately that there was no one in the world to compare with Uncle Eric.

"You're sure you're fit to go through with it, Val?" He looked at her rather anxiously, for she still looked pale and fragile. "Don't tire yourself, and be very careful of draughts."

"Oh, I'll take care of myself!" She laid her hand caressingly over his for a second as she slipped off the chair. "*Au revoir,* Uncle Eric. Mind you applaud my pictures louder than any of the others!"

She laughed and moved away in answer to an imperative summons from Countess Chris; and Sir Eric turned to the dainty little programme he held, with a faint stirring of interest in his heart.

There were a dozen pictures in all; and Valerie figured in four or five. Atalanta, being one of the recognised successes of the programme, came about half-way through the evening, with the Judgment of Paris shortly afterwards; and in accordance with Lady Lucia's request, Cleopatra had been reserved until the very end.

The evening was to finish with a banquet to all the performers and a large concourse of friends; and it had been suggested that their costumes should be retained by those who desired to appear in them—a fact which possibly accounted for Lucia's wish that Cleopatra should be the last character assumed by her.

From first to last the entertainment was a triumph for all who took part; and M. Lammin, who, with a staff of assistants, was responsible for the lighting effects, received many congratulations on his skill. In every respect the pictures were as nearly perfect as care could make them; and as Lady Thirsk had suggested, miracles could be, and had been, effected by the judicious use of "make-up."

On Valerie's first appearance, as one of the ball-playing maidens of Nausicaa, it was plain that for the moment at least she had cast off her lassitude, and was ready to throw herself into the spirit of the evening; and Sir Eric felt relieved thereby, for he had wondered, rather anxiously, if he had done right in allowing her to take part at all after her recent illness.

The picture met with great applause, and from that time onwards the audience grew more and more fervent in their appreciation of the performers' efforts.

When at last the curtain was drawn aside to show Valerie as the swift-footed daughter of Clymene, the enthusiasm reached its climax. There was, in truth, something about the picture which held a subtle appeal for the spectators. Many pretty women had already appeared on the platform; but there was something about Atalanta, something vital, something of the essential spirit of youth, of radiant maidenhood, which was new to the audience.

Her pose, as she stood with her golden head thrown back, her whole body thrilling, for all her stillness, with the joy of life, of motion, the eager look in her brown eyes, the parting of the softly-curving lips, betokened a joyous, a splendid youth which could only find the highest satisfaction in movement; and the poise of the slim body in its gold-girdled garment, the arch of the slender, sandalled feet, seemed to promise that when movement followed this moment of arrested life, it would be as full of poetry, as full of enchantment, as was this pause.

Lady Lucia, as Aphrodite, came in for only a secondary amount of interest; and in her heart she regretted having insisted on taking part in the picture, for she was unaccustomed to the background; and it was easy to see that it was the central figure on whom all eyes were fixed.

As for Victor, it was well for him that Lucia had no attention to spare for him. For as he stood watching the girl, holding the golden apple in his hand, he was telling himself bitterly that the Fate which took her from him and substituted in her place Lucia Holland was too damnable to be endured.

Never had he so passionately desired Valerie as to-night, when she was lost to him for ever. He told himself he loved every hair of her golden head, every glance from her eyes, every touch of her slim hand. And in her place he was given Lucia Holland, the woman who had tried, vainly, to ruin his life years ago, and had now, through a turn of Fortune's wheel, found it possible to attain her end at last.

As he stood beside Lucia Holland to-night, he hated her in his heart; and forgetful of the fact that stillness was an essential factor of a successful performance he slowly clenched his empty hand and ground his teeth together at the thought of his own impotence to escape from her toils.

When the curtain had descended Lucia rallied him languidly on his lack of self-restraint.

"Didn't you know you were supposed to keep still, Victor?" Her voice was like honey. "I saw you move, out of the corner of my eye, and I expect the audience saw too."

An answer was unnecessary; for the spectators would not be denied a second view of the picture; and the actors therein hastily resumed their respective poses as the curtain was raised again.

Even after this repetition the audience were unsatisfied; and at length, on the advice of the stage manager, the three appeared for a second before the curtain to receive the plaudits of the onlookers; and again Lucia's eyes grew stormy beneath their delicate brows as she realised that the main share of applause was directed towards the youthful Atalanta.

It was not in human nature for a girl to remain unmoved by such a tribute, and Valerie's eyes sparkled as she sped from the stage at last. It happened that in her haste she did not pick her steps very carefully, and tripping over a cushion which someone had inadvertently left on the stairs leading to the green room, she would have fallen had not Victor caught her safely by the arm and dragged her back from danger.

"Valerie, for God's sake be careful!" His voice sounded hoarse. "You might hurt yourself seriously if you fell down those steps."

"I . . . I didn't see. . . ." Something in his tone set her heart beating violently. "But thank you all the same."

"They are very awkward steps, I always said so." Victor still held her, as though unconsciously, by the arm. "Someone will have an accident before long."

"I hope it won't be me," she said, with an attempt at flippancy. "You might not be so ready to save me another time, Milanion!"

"Don't talk like that, Valerie." She could see his chest heaving beneath his Greek robes. "I—don't you know I'd die for you—Atalanta!"

Something in his tone turned her cold from head to foot. There was in it none of the joyous fervency of the lover, for all the ardour of the words; and when he had spoken he released her suddenly, and turning away, left her instantly, as though he dared not trust himself in her presence another moment.

Chilled and bewildered, the girl groped her way down the steps and into the green room; and now all the buoyancy, the sparkle, had gone from her appearance, so that even the other performers, wrapped up as each one was in her own preparations, noticed the sudden extinction of her gaiety.

Now she found her recent indisposition of value, for a murmur of fatigue was enough to set tongues wagging on the imprudence of allowing her to appear so soon after her illness; and one or two kind-hearted women insisted on helping her to disrobe, and then wrapped her up and made her lie on a convenient couch until it should be necessary to dress for her next appearance.

Lady Lucia, meanwhile, was gathering laurels enough to satisfy even her vanity. She appeared next as Circe in a wonderful picture painted by a Greek artist, representing the first meeting of Ulysses with the enchantress; and her beauty was so striking that for a moment the vast concourse of people held their breath, before an audible murmur of admiration was heard in the crowded ranks. She had hoped that Romney would appear as Ulysses, but Victor had refused, point-blank; and the part had been given to a young Greek who held some position at one of the museums. He was a brother of the painter, and was a handsome boy with soft eyes and charming manners, who was so overcome with his good fortune at being able to pose with the famous Lady Lucia that his expression as he gazed at her seemed to indicate that the spell of the sorceress was already woven around him.

This picture, too, aroused enormous enthusiasm; and so the evening progressed, from triumph to triumph; and when at last the curtain fell for the last time the applause was prolonged and sincere.

After all the promoters of the entertainment had been "called" and granted their due meed of appreciation, M. Lammin made a short speech, thanking the visitors for their kind reception of the pictures, and assuring them that the whole affair had been a labour of love to all who took part. Following him came Mrs. Graham, who proceeded to inform the gathering that, thanks to their generous and unstinted support, the fund for the persecuted Armenians would benefit to the tune of several hundreds of pounds—a result which all agreed was highly satisfactory.

The last speech of the evening, a short one, was made by Dr. Calanterients; and at the thought of the relief which the money would bring to many of his suffering countrymen and countrywomen he broke down completely, and uttered only a few words of heartfelt gratitude, which were none the less touching because the speaker's voice failed him as he tried to thank them all for what they had done.

This concluded the business of the evening, and all who were leaving at once came to take smiling farewell of their hostess and repeat their congratulations on the splendid success of the entertainment. It was nearly half an hour before the last good-bye was said; but at length Mrs. Graham and her satellites were free to join the guests in the huge dining hall, which to night was ablaze with lamps, brilliant with masses of flowers which rivalled in hue the colours of the dresses worn by the women present.

There was a long table down the centre of the tesselated floor; and when Mrs. Graham had taken her place at the table she heaved a sigh of relief which was echoed by several who heard her.

"Thank goodness that's over!" She looked very bright and vivacious in spite of her words. "Now, good people, let us eat! I couldn't eat any dinner, and I'm starving!"

To judge from the alacrity with which her invitation was accepted, her guests were in like case; and in a few moments the feast was in full swing. For all the trouble the entertainment had entailed upon the household, Mrs. Graham had spared no pains to give her guests a meal worthy of their attention; and the mere sight of the table, decorated with masses of roses, laden with silver and with the exquisite glass for which Mr. Graham had scoured a continent, was enough, one would think, to create an appetite in the veriest anchorite.

On any other occasion Valerie would have enjoyed the delicacies which were offered to her. But to-night she was tired, her head ached, and perhaps her heart. And the wonderful dishes which comprised the *ménu* held little appeal for her. She had slipped into the room clinging fast to her uncle's arm, and had gladly taken a seat beside him, her other neighbour being the young Greek who had played the part of Ulysses.

At the beginning of the meal he had turned to her with his charming, rather melancholy smile, and congratulated her on her appearance as Atalanta.

" You were very successful in your other pictures—Charmian for instance." His gaze travelled over her stiff Egyptian draperies approvingly. " But of all, I prefer Atalanta. You seemed, if I may say so without offence, to have entered so thoroughly into the spirit of Greece—a feat which as a rule presents so difficult a problem to the modern girl."

" I'm glad you think so." Her eyes were roaming up and down the table. " Lady Lucia was wonderful as Circe, wasn't she? By the way, where is she? "

" On the other side of the table—a good way up."

" Oh, yes, I see." Her voice died away.

" She sits with Mr. Romney," said the Greek in his slow, careful English. " But that is wrong. He should be here, where I am fortunate enough to be, and Circe should have her Ulysses by her side." He smiled to show he meant no offence; and she roused herself to reply in the same manner.

" But Lady Lucia isn't Circe any longer." She spoke the more emphatically because of the pang which had pierced her heart at the sight of those two sitting side by side, beyond the roses. " She is Cleopatra now, and Count Rossi ought to have been her partner."

" He is yonder, beside the lady you call Countess Chrees." She followed his eyes and saw that he had spoken the truth. " It is strange, is it not, that even in the robes of the ancient world Countess Chrees looks the embodiment of the modern civilisation? It is the type, not so? But you, if I may say it, are Atalanta, always Atalanta, never what you call the ' flappist '—no, the ' flapper,' of to-day."

" My uncle strongly disapproves of the modern flapper," she said smiling; and for the rest of supper she managed to keep up a desultory conversation with the young Greek, who, on his part, was only too willing to respond to her shy friendliness.

And all the time Valerie was in torture. The sight of Victor and Lady Lucia was like constant pressure on an open wound; and every time Lucia let her blue eyes rest, languorously, on the young man's face, Valerie felt as though her heart wept tears of blood. She could not understand Victor's aloof attitude. Surely when he spoke to her at the top of the steps he had been sincere, yet now he never even looked her way.

And Valerie was puzzled, too, by Rossi's manner towards her. Once or twice during the evening he had come up to her, and there had been something possessive in the way he spoke to her which had vaguely alarmed her; but he had not pressed his attentions on her, and although she was thankful to be left in peace there was something disturbing in the way he looked at her out of his densely black eyes.

It was getting really late before the party drew to a close. Toasts were drunk, friendly little speeches made; and at last by common consent Mrs. Graham was induced to reply in the name of the company for all the nice things which had been said about them. She made a witty little speech, which put everyone in still further good humour; and then, without warning, launched the arrow which was to pierce Valerie's quivering heart to its very core.

"Before we separate, there is something I want to say," said Lila radiantly. "I have something to tell you—I only heard it myself just before supper, and I am sure you will all be as interested as I am. You have all said pretty things about the pictures, especially about Atalanta, in which Miss Rivers was so splendid"—she nodded kindly down the table to the embarrassed girl—"and about the Judgment of Paris. Well, there was an inner significance about that last picture. We all saw Mr. Romney—otherwise Paris—in the act of handing the golden apple to Aphrodite as the prize for beauty. What we did not know was that Paris in his turn had won a prize—far more valuable than any apple, whether of gold or not."

She paused a moment, looking about her with her brilliant eyes.

"I think you can all guess my meaning. But if not, let me ask you to congratulate Mr. Romney on his good fortune in securing his prize—the hand of the lovely Aphrodite!"

She sat down, pleased with her own efforts; and after a momentary silence a buzz of congratulation arose up and down the long table. Someone sprang up, glass in hand, and in another minute the whole party were on their feet drinking the health of the betrothed pair. Valerie rose with the rest, though in truth she did not know what she was doing; and for one dreadful moment the room, to her, was a chaos of light and sound, a misty vision in which only one face stood out clearly, the face of the man whom she loved, and had, apparently, lost. . . .

His blue eyes were looking straight into hers across the world which had, so suddenly, separated them . . . and in those eyes she read a last, a final farewell.

Pride sustained her through the last half-hour of that fateful evening; and more than one person commented on the fact that Miss Rivers looked less exhausted, less worn out than she had done before supper. One kindly soul, Mrs. Malcolm, a rich widow who was wintering at Shepheard's, said as much to Sir Eric.

"Your pretty little niece looked dreadfully done up before supper. I expect her vitality was exhausted—young girls haven't much stamina, and a good meal often does wonders for them."

"Quite so." Sir Eric, who had been oddly silent during the gay banquet, glanced at Valerie as she chatted with the young Greek, who could not, apparently, tear himself away from her side; and his voice was rather cold. "My niece has been ill lately, and I don't like all this excitement for her. I think I'll take her home at once."

"The best thing you can do." It was Dr. Dryden who interposed; and Sir Eric turned to him in surprise.

"Hallo, Dryden, didn't see you. Yes, I'll take the child home at once." He took a polite farewell of Mrs. Malcolm and turned back to the doctor. "It's confoundedly late and I'm tired myself."

"Yes, it's been a long affair." Dr. Dryden glanced at his friend rather curiously. "You look fagged out—had enough, eh?"

"Yes." For a moment Sir Eric stood still, looking absently in front of him. Then he said suddenly: "I wish you'd come and see me in the morning, Dryden. There's something I'd like to consult you about."

"Not professionally, I hope?" Dr. Dryden, looking at him closely, told himself his friend had begun, all at once, to age.

"No. Nothing of that sort. Only—I'm worried, and I'd value your advice."

"It shall be yours, for what it's worth." He spoke quietly, and Sir Eric's face relaxed somewhat.

"Here is Valerie," said Dr. Dryden, as she approached them, her wrap over her Egyptian dress, having at last shaken off her Greek admirer. "Now, young lady, the best thing you can do is to get home, go to sleep, and don't hurry up in the morning. Tell Anna to bring you your breakfast to bed, eh?"

"I'm not a bit sleepy!" There was a flush on her cheeks, and her eyes glittered. "Hasn't it been a gorgeous party, Dr. Dryden? I'm only sorry its all over now!"

"Run away to bed, my dear!" He patted her arm. "I think it's a very good thing it's all over. Excitement and late hours are very bad for children, you know."

"Ah, but I'm not a child any longer!" For a moment a great bitterness rang in her young voice; and, as though she feared she had betrayed herself, she turned impulsively to Sir Eric. "I'm quite ready, Uncle dear. I've got my coat, you see, and—and I believe I *do* want to go home after all!"

"Very well, Valerie." Sir Eric's manner was oddly grave; and the girl shot a startled glance at him as she moved beside him to the door.

A moment later they were gone, and Dr. Dryden walked towards the room where his hostess was bidding her guests adieu, with a very serious look on his scholarly face.

"Sir Eric seems upset, strange," he said to himself as he paused for a moment in the doorway. "I wonder—has he heard anything? I'm afraid he has. And what, in God's name, will he say to that poor, pretty, silly child if there is any truth in what they are saying about her to-night?"

He shook his head sadly at the bare idea; and having taken leave of Mrs. Graham, he walked homewards, very thoughtfully, through the darkness.

But Sir Eric sat alone till dawn; and when at length he rose and went towards his room his face was that, almost, of an old man.

## XXI

On the following morning, when, according to instructions, Valerie's late breakfast was brought to her room by Anna, there was a note on the tray addressed in Sir Eric's small, firm hand-writing; and on opening the envelope Valerie found therein a request that she would go to her uncle's study as soon as she was dressed.

There was nothing unusual in the summons, since it was quite possible Sir Eric had some instructions to give her as to expected guests; but somehow as she looked at the note Valerie's heart gave a throb of apprehension, as though she feared the prospective interview.

It was after eleven when she came, rather shyly, into the study; and Sir Eric looked up from his papers, and directed a quick and piercing look at her face.

He himself looked oddly tired and strained in the bright morning light; and again Valerie's heart throbbed with a fear she could not overcome.

She stood just inside the door, as though waiting for the summons to advance; and Sir Eric thought suddenly what a child she looked, her pale gold hair swathed round her head, her white blouse open at the throat, her white skirt short enough to show her slim ankles in their white stockings, and the well-poised feet which had been so well suited to the part of Atalanta.

And as he looked at her a great hope awoke in Sir Eric's heart. This monstrous thing which he had heard could not be true. The brown eyes under their candid brows could not, surely, be mirrors of deceit. That innocent mouth could not be the gateway of lies, nor was it possible to believe that this youth and freshness were but the veil which concealed an intriguing soul, finding delight in dark and crooked ways.

With renewed hope in his heart Sir Eric held out his hand to his niece; and as she advanced rather slowly to his side he spoke with all his accustomed kindness.

"Well, Val, are you rested? I told Anna not to wake you till ten o'clock, on pain of instant dismissal."

"Yes, thank you, Uncle Eric, I'm quite rested. But *you* look very tired and done up. Are you tired this morning?"

"Yes." Still holding her hand he looked at her keenly. "I *am* tired. But chiefly, I think, because I did not sleep well."

"Didn't you? I'm so sorry. I suppose we were really pretty late last night."

"Late hours alone wouldn't affect me, Val dear. To tell the truth, I was worried about something I heard last night. That was why I could not sleep."

Instantly Valerie was on the alert, and glancing at her Sir Eric could not fail to notice the look of panic which flashed into her face. The hand he held turned cold in his; and for a second there was a silence, pregnant with a hundred horrid possibilities.

Then Valerie said slowly:

"I'm sorry you were worried. But—what did you hear that kept you awake?"

Looking at her steadily, and dropping her hand from his, Sir Eric made answer.

"I heard something about you, Valerie, something so incredible that I have been telling myself ever since that I cannot have heard aright, that my ears deceived me, and the men who spoke were speaking of some one else—of anyone rather than of you."

For a moment Valerie stood there, cold from head to foot. She did not think she could articulate a word, her lips felt so stiff; yet she heard a voice, which must be hers, say presently:

"What was it that you heard, Uncle Eric? And who said it?"

"You had better sit down, Valerie." Sir Eric's voice was colourless. "It is a long story; and there is much to be said between us." He paused. "But first, tell me exactly what degree of intimacy—of friendship"—he corrected himself hastily—"there is between you and Count Rossi."

Absolutely incapable of speech Valerie stood staring at him; and he saw he must give her time to meet this monstrous charge which he was about to level at her. He pulled forward a chair, and in obedience to his gesture Valerie sat down, and faced him with a composure which was the outcome of absolute despair.

"During the first part of the performance last night," began Sir Eric in a passionless tone at length, "I was sitting, as you know, well to the front of the room. Finding myself too near the platform, however, I decided to move back before your big picture came on. I left my seat, and while Atalanta was being shown I sat a good way down the room, which was, of course, in darkness. This accounts for the fact that the people in the row behind me did not realise I was just in front, or, possibly, they did not know me. At any rate they began, presently, in lowered tones, which yet reached me quite plainly, to discuss"—he paused—"to discuss the Atalanta, who they were good enough to say was a very charming exponent of the Greek type she represented. After that, however, they passed on to make less complimentary remarks."

"What did they say?" She had been looking down at her clasped hands, but now she raised her eyes to his face.

"They said"—for a second he bit his lips—"I can't repeat their exact words, which were not fit for your ears." In truth the speakers had used no euphemisms. "But I gathered that they thought of you as being on terms of—of greater intimacy with Count Rossi than a girl in your position has—er—any right to be."

He was finding it very hard to speak, with her eyes staring at him so affrightedly; but he made an effort and continued in the same expressionless tone.

"They said, moreover, that it was well known that you had been taking money from Rossi in order to pay your gambling debts. That in itself was a sufficiently startling accusation to make me turn hot with shame; but when, after a pause, they resumed their conversation, they said something so horrible, so—so vile, that it was all I could do to restrain myself from calling them to account there and then."

He broke off, breathing quickly; and Valerie sat as though turned to stone, realising that the moment of revelation was upon her at last, realising, too, that she had no weapons with which to fight her enemies.

"They said, asserted it as a fact, laughed over it as a joke, that you were in the habit of visiting Count Rossi's house at night; that on more than one occasion you had been seen there at midnight, apparently having supper with the man—alone——"

"That is a lie." She spoke heavily, but Sir Eric looked at her swiftly.

"A lie? I am glad to hear that. Not that I dreamed for one instant that you would go to Rossi's house—alone. But I should like to know, Valerie, what imprudence you have been committing, to give these people the shadow of an excuse to couple your name with his."

She opened her lips to speak, but no words came; and after a moment Sir Eric resumed his enquiry.

"When first you came out, that fellow had the impertinence to hang round you, trying to make you conspicuous; and I was obliged to hint, courteously, that I did not care for a closer acquaintance between you. I told you that, for various reasons, Count Rossi was not a suitable person for you to become intimate with; and I understood that you had complied with my wishes."

Again he waited, and again the silence held.

"I am aware that you have been obliged to meet the man on various occasions, particularly during the rehearsals for the *tableaux*. But surely you have never been on any terms but those of the merest acquaintanceship?"

She did not reply; and Sir Eric frowned.

"I'm afraid, my dear, I must ask for a little more frankness if this matter is to be elucidated. You *have* met Count Rossi—fairly frequently?"

"Yes."

"You have played cards in his company?"

"Yes."

"He has doubtless been aware of the fact that you have been unlucky, have lost money at the bridge table?"

"Yes." The monosyllable came with monotonous regularity.

"You have mentioned your losses to him, perhaps? Deploring, jokingly, the fact that you must dip into your allowance to pay your debts?"

"Yes. I have sometimes mentioned it."

"But naturally Count Rossi has known you were jesting. He would never offer to lend you money—except in the merest joke?"

But after this question so long a pause ensued that Sir Eric felt his heart beat apprehensively.

"You must answer me, Valerie. Did Count Rossi ever offer to lend you money?"

"Yes." She gazed, unseeingly, at him, and her eyes were tragic.

"On what occasion?"

"It was one night—long ago—at Mrs. van Ralton's."

"You had lost money?"

"Yes."

"How much, Valerie?"

"Seventy-five pounds."

"*Seventy-five pounds?*" He was amazed, incredulous. "You mean that they—your hosts—*allowed* you to play for such high stakes that you lost seventy-five pounds?"

"Yes. I don't think Mrs. van Ralton knew. . . . I didn't want to play, but Countess Chris said I must, and I couldn't get out of it."

"So Lady Thirsk was there? Did she know you had lost so much money?"

"I don't think so—not then, at any rate."

"Well." Sir Eric's manner was colder than ever now. "Proceed with this pretty story. You lost seventy-five pounds, and naturally you could not pay. What happened next?"

"I hadn't the money to pay. I would have borrowed from Lady Thirsk, but she had lost too. I didn't know what to do, because the man I owed it to, Captain Emary, was leaving Cairo almost immediately. And so—I mentioned it to

Count Rossi—or he asked me if I'd lost—I can't remember how it happened."

"He became aware of the fact that you owed this large sum of money, which you couldn't pay. But—did he offer to lend it to you?"

"Yes. At first he suggested I should tell you and ask you for the money——"

"He did?" Sir Eric, knowing nothing of the Italian's subtlety, was surprised.

"Yes. And when I said I daren't"—her uncle frowned—"he offered to lend me the sum. I didn't know what to do, but in the end I took it. And he paid the man for me."

"You paid him back—when?"

"Oh, I couldn't—for ages. So I gave him an I.O.U."—Sir Eric uttered an impatient exclamation—"and agreed to pay him interest."

"He took it?"

"Yes. And I paid some of the interest, and then—oh, Uncle Eric, don't ask me any more!"

"I must, Val." But he spoke more kindly. "I must know all about it, because naturally I must pay him back at once."

"Oh, it's paid. I've paid him——" Her voice died in her throat at the sight of his face.

"You've paid him? Out of your winnings?"

"No." Suddenly she saw where her admission had led her; and she clasped her hands tightly together to still their trembling.

"Then how, Valerie? Where did you get the money to pay Rossi?"

"I can't tell you, Uncle." Indeed she felt that she could not.

"I'm afraid you must." He spoke quietly.

"Oh, uncle, please—can't you let the matter drop now?" She was driven to plead. "The money is paid—I'm free now, and I only want never to have to think of it again."

"I'm afraid that's no use, Val. I must know everything before I can take any steps to put things straight. Besides"—he tapped his fingers impatiently on the table—"this is only half the story. After this there is lots more to be explained away, if possible. But we'll finish with this first. Where did you get the money to pay your debt?"

She looked away from him, and in desperation spoke the truth.

"I sold my mother's ring, the emerald ring you said I might have."

"You sold the emerald ring? But, in heaven's name, child, how did you know how to set about it?"

Seeing prevarication was useless she told him the whole story of the transaction with M. Poiret; and Sir Eric groaned in spirit as he realised that for weeks this child had been deceiving him, had been involved in a web of intrigue, of tacit lying, of which he would never have believed her to be capable.

To learn that she had carried through the affair alone was strangely disturbing, and Sir Eric told himself grimly that once again in the history of femininity had a woman unblushingly played the traitor to those to whom she owed allegiance.

When the story came, falteringly, to an end, Sir Eric sighed rather wearily.

"You made a provisional arrangement for the redemption of the ring?" He saw she did not understand, and spoke more plainly. "You have the option of repurchasing it within a certain time?"

"Yes. M. Poiret promised he would not sell it for at least three months."

"Well, that matter at least is easily adjusted." He took out his pocket-book and turned to a vacant page. "Tell me the date of this transaction, please, and the exact sum you received for the ring."

In a low voice she gave him the particulars for which he asked; and when he had carefully noted them down he closed the book and returned it to his pocket.

"The next matter is this." He took off his eyeglasses and laid them on the table beside him. "The men from whom I heard these interesting rumours last night asserted that you were in the habit of visiting Count Rossi's villa *at night*. One of them went so far as to state that he had himself met you there after midnight on one occasion; and he proceeded from that to other still more scandalous allegations."

What Desmond had said was, briefly, this:

"Of course *we* weren't expected, Vennin and I. Rossi had apparently forgotten our *rendezvous,* or had imagined he'd cancelled it. Anyway, we butted in—were there first, as a matter of fact, and a little later Rossi and the girl, with whom he was evidently on—well, intimate terms, turned up for supper. It was jolly late, you know, after twelve o'clock, anyway; and from the way the girl came in and went straight up to the piano it was evidently not her first visit by long chalks!"

Remembering this speech, Sir Eric recalled also the reply to it.

"Shouldn't have thought it of the girl. She's a lady, isn't she—and Sir Eric is a decent chap, I should say. Of course, these simple-looking girls are the very devil, sometimes, regular hot stuff when they get going; and I suppose if she would go out to his place at midnight there couldn't be much doubt as to their relationship."

And Desmond had replied, with a laugh:

"Not on your life, old chap! Oh, Rossi was her lover all right—why else should she go out there at that time of night? And in any case it's well known he's financed her for months."

And as the hateful words flashed through his mind Sir Eric groaned aloud.

"Val, it's hardly necessary to ask you if this statement is a lie. You have never visited Rossi's villa?"

"No, Uncle Eric." But in her own ears the lie sounded unconvincing.

"You are sure, Valerie?" His eyes were very keen as he looked at her; and the girl moistened her dry lips before she spoke.

"Yes, Uncle Eric, I am quite sure."

"Then you cannot account for this extraordinary story?"

"No." She lied desperately now.

"Then I must take steps to shut the mouths of these scandalmongers." He held out his hand to her, with a smile that pierced her to the heart. "My poor little Val, you've been indiscreet, but nothing worse. You ought never to have taken money from Rossi—why in God's name didn't you come to me for it? I should have been horrified, of course, but equally of course I would have paid your debts. And the fact that Rossi did lend you money is terribly against you. You don't know the world, Val, and you don't know how people look upon a woman who allows a man to whom she is not related to pay her debts. If we could have denied this fact, as well as the other, we should have been in a much stronger position. As it is—well, I must do the best I can. My only fear is that this man may have scattered his scandalous lie broadcast; and in that case it will be more difficult to scotch it effectually."

He put his arm kindly round her and drew her to his side.

"Well, Val, cheer up. Let this be a lesson to you, little girl. You have learned for yourself how terrible the course of deceit may be; and you know quite well that from the day you accepted money, secretly, from Count Rossi, you have been acting a lie—to me. And see in what it has involved you. It will not be very pleasant for me to go to M. Poiret and ask to be allowed to buy back the ring. But of course I will do it, gladly, for your sake, and for your mother's sake as well. And for the sake of both of you I will try to shield you from the consequences of your folly."

He paused, then resumed in a more bracing tone.

"Now, Val, look up and let us see what is the first thing to be done. Come, Valerie——" she had turned her face away from him—"what's the matter now? You've confessed and been forgiven, and though I'm afraid you've made Cairo too hot to hold you for a little while, if we go for a short trip I dare say all this will be forgotten when we return."

"Stop, Uncle Eric!" Her voice startled him. "You don't know everything, even yet! I've lied to you, again—but I can't go on lying. There's ever so much more that you don't know, and when you do—if you say I am to marry Count Rossi I think I shall kill myself!"

Sir Eric sprang to his feet, alarmed out of all self-control. The girl looked so distraught, her words were so ominously significant, that for one moment he was ready to bid her keep silence, for he was afraid to hear what she had to say.

She too had sprung up; and now she faced him with heaving breast and wide, terrified eyes.

"Valerie, what are you saying? You don't mean—you can't mean that you—that Rossi—good God, Valerie, tell me at once what you are trying to imply?"

She was as agitated as he, and her voice was broken and hoarse.

"I mean—he thinks we are engaged—he says I *must* marry him, that even you would say so—and oh, Uncle Eric, I can't—I can't marry him—I should be so miserable I should want to die."

Suddenly Sir Eric grew calm. In the face of her terror his anger could not exist; and although he was afraid, with a new and horrible fear, he knew that he must keep up a semblance of composure if he were to learn the truth.

"Valerie, no one will force you to marry Count Rossi unless there is any good reason for the marriage. And I will not believe that you would give him that reason."

"But he said—you know this *wasn't* the first time I'd been there, and he said if you knew—if anyone in Cairo knew——"

Sir Eric grew cold beneath this sinister explanation, which yet explained nothing.

"You *have* visited Rossi's villa—at night?"

"Yes. Once when I went to get the money, and then on the night I paid him back. It was that night that those men saw me there——"

"Ah! So they did see you? That fellow wasn't lying?"

"No. There were two, but I only knew one, M. Vennin——"

"You saw them—spoke to them?"

"Yes—for a moment. M. Vennin seemed surprised to see me—and—and horrified . . . but the other man looked at me so—so dreadfully that I wished I could fall down dead!"

"What happened next?"

"I c[illegible]ember. But somehow I found myself in the car on [illegible]y home—and the next day I was ill. And that is all."

"Quite enough too," commented Sir Eric dryly. "Upon my word, Valerie, you have made a pretty mess of things. And it strikes me that if this story is all over Cairo by now you will have to marry Rossi——"

He broke off, struck by something in his own words; and after a second's hesitation he continued rather quickly.

"Valerie, you said a few minutes ago that Rossi said if I knew everything I should expect you to marry him. Well, what did you—or he—mean by that?"

"I don't quite know." But something in her face told him that his darker fears were unfounded. "Count Rossi has said for ages—ever since he lent me the money—that we were engaged. He has always talked as though we were to be married some day; and he said that when I took the seventy-five pounds from him he understood that I meant I was ready to marry him—I mean that I shouldn't have taken it if I hadn't meant to be his wife."

"A pretty bargain, upon my word!" Sir Eric began to pace up and down the room, and his face was gloomy. "He's made love to you then, Valerie. Has he kissed you?"

"Yes, once or twice." Her cheeks burned at the remembrance. "I tried to prevent him, but it wasn't any good."

"You think he really wants to marry you?"

"Yes. I'm sure he does." Her tone carried conviction. "But, Uncle Eric, I shan't have to, shall I?"

"I don't know, Val." He read consternation in her face. "It seems to me you've managed to compromise yourself pretty hopelessly, and it may be that there's no other way out of it. Good God, Valerie, what possessed you to be such an arrant little fool? To go to that man's house at midnight—didn't you *know* what risks you ran?"

She looked at him without replying, and he saw it was useless to prolong the scene

"Well, I shall have to find out for myself how things really are." He turned towards the door. "You'd better go and keep quiet, Val. Don't go out until I see you again—tell Anna you're not at home to anyone. I suppose——" he halted and faced her—"I suppose Rossi won't attempt to see you here?"

"I don't know," she said miserably; and Sir Eric turned back and opened the door.

"Well, go and rest, Valerie, you look a ghost. Is that the bell? Yes. Be quick, there's no need for you to see visitors to-day."

She needed no second bidding, but vanished into her own room; and a moment later Sir Eric heard a familiar voice and hurried across the hall to meet the new-comer.

"That you, Dryden? Good—I've been expecting you. Come in. Have a peg?"

"No, thanks." He accepted the invitation to enter the study, and when the door was shut he faced his host squarely.

"Well, Sir Eric, you wanted to see me, and here I am. What's the trouble, eh?"

"It's to do with Valerie."

"Valerie, has it? Well——" he was not going to give himself away yet—"what about the child? She's better, isn't she?"

"Yes. But—well, it's a confoundedly hard thing to say, but Valerie's made a mess of things, and apparently she has got herself talked about pretty well in Cairo since she came out a few months ago."

"With that fellow Rossi, eh?"

Sir Eric stared at him.

"You've heard it too, then—this story about him lending her money and all the rest?"

"I'm sorry to say I have." He looked Sir Eric straight in the face. "I heard it last night, but that wasn't the first time. It's over a week ago that I heard it first, and I put it down to mere club gossip."

"They have talked of it at the club?"

"Yes." He hesitated for a moment. "Look here, Sir Eric, you have brought up the subject yourself, and I suppose you want me to be frank. Or—if you like to drop it now, we'll do so right away."

"No, I want to hear all you know, Dryden. Sit down, please, and let us have it out."

"Very well." He sat down as requested. "To put it plainly, then, your niece has compromised herself pretty well with Rossi—oh, innocently, of course, I know that, and so do you—but none the less completely. It is common property that he has paid her bridge debts once—if not more; and it is also said that she goes out alone to his house at night. Those are the bones of the story, so to speak. Of course there are endless variations of the theme. One person—a woman, naturally—told me in confidence that Valerie's so-called illness of a few days ago was a fiction invented by us to cover her absence from Cairo, an absence which coincided with Rossi's departure—in other words, that they had gone off together. When or how she returned my informant had, of course, no knowledge. Another scandal-monger has it that they spent hours motoring together: and there are no end of variations on the same theme."

"In other words, all Cairo is talking?"

"Yes. I'm telling you everything I know, because, as I say, frankness is best. And there is one fellow in the town, a chap called Desmond, who swears that he went out unexpectedly to Rossi's house one night and found them in the middle of a passionate love scene. That, of course, is pure fiction."

"Unfortunately it isn't." Sir Eric spoke coldly, and no one would have guessed the fire of angry disgust which raged in his heart. "Valerie *did* meet the fellow out at Rossi's villa, with another man, a Frenchman."

"Vennin—yes. It seems that some man cast a doubt on Desmond's word and he appealed to Vennin for corroboration. But Vennin merely said, quietly, that he had no recollection of the circumstance; and Desmond was silenced for the moment."

"Does Rossi make any statement?"

"Well, it's difficult to tackle a fellow on a subject of this sort. But I understand one or two chaps have congratulated him, and although he did not exactly admit an engagement his manner was apparently such as to give colour to the story."

"But—good God, Dryden, must I let the child marry him? She doesn't want to—sobs and cries at the thought—swears she'll kill herself, and all that sort of thing."

"That's probably nerves," said the doctor judicially. "She sees she has got herself into a scrape and doesn't know how to get out of it. Honestly, you know, she might do worse than marry him. You know what a girl's reputation is—a breath and it's tarnished for ever; and unfortunately this is the kind of story which clings to a woman's name wherever she goes."

"But she's so young—my poor little Valerie!"

"Of course, and that makes it all the harder—for her. But—well, Rossi is a gentleman, belongs to a good family, I understand, and has connections of the most unimpeachable respectability. I've been making inquiries about him during the last few days, and although I can't find out that he has much money, his mother, the Countess, has a very large income, which will eventually, I believe, come to this fellow."

"But his reputation——"

"Well, one used to hear stories about him once, but of late he seems to have been living quite irreproachably. And you know he never made himself notorious with women, as so many of the young bloods do. It was wine and cards which proved specially attractive to Rossi, but I confess he has turned over a new leaf lately."

"Dryden"—Sir Eric looked at him keenly—"are you trying to persuade me that a marriage with Rossi would be for Valerie's happiness?"

"Look here, Sir Eric—" the other man's voice was decisive—"I know as well as you do that Rossi isn't the chap one would have chosen for little Valerie. Now if only she and young Romney had fixed things up——"

"Gad, I'd forgotten that affair!" Sir Eric frowned thoughtfully. "He and that woman—eh? Well, either she is more of a Delilah even than I gave her credit for, or all that holding-off on Romney's part was a fake, a make-believe. I'm sorry, in any case, for the boy. He was worthy of something better, and I had almost begun to persuade myself that he was attracted by Valerie."

"Well, that's off now, and the thing is to decide what is to be done. Of course you've not seen Rossi. Why not meet him, and hear what he has to say? On the face of it he has acted disgracefully, allowing the girl to compromise herself like this. To begin with, he had no right to offer her money."

"Valerie tells me he advised her, in the first place, to apply to me——"

"He did?" Dr. Dryden was surprised. "Well, that was pretty straightforward. Of course, the fellow may be genuinely in love with her, and in that case——"

"You recommend me to permit the marriage?"

"Only if the damage done is really considerable. Oh"—he spoke hastily—"I don't mean he is likely to have harmed the girl in any way, but you know if her reputation is—well, damaged irretrievably, what is to happen?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, decent men will fight shy of her, sweet, pretty child as she is; and though with her money she will never be condemned to spinsterhood, you don't want some damned fortune-hunter slipping in and collaring her for her money, do you?"

"No. The only redeeming feature about the affair is Rossi's ignorance of Valerie's circumstances." Sir Eric spoke in good faith. "He evidently wants her—if he does want her—for herself; and that is in his favour."

"Well, you see him—send for him and have a straight talk," advised Dr. Dryden, rising rather stiffly. "Of course if he does not ring true—if he genuinely doesn't mean to do his best to remedy the ills he has brought about by his own carelessness, well, then you must send him about his business. But if he is really fond of Valerie, and seems anxious to make amends, well, I think you should give him a chance at least."

"Right. I'll send out a note and ask him to come in this afternoon." Sir Eric sighed wearily. "What a coil it all is. And it shows me one thing very plainly—a girl, a young girl like Valerie—needs another woman to keep an eye on her. She can deceive a man—a man of the world like myself—even a diplomatist, if you like; take him in so completely that he never suspects any double-dealing, and can do it all with the most innocent smile, the most ingenuous, loving ways in the world. I believe a woman would have seen through Val long ago. You know, there's more in the affair than you know, Dryden, a whole long story of intrigue and lying. What would you think of a girl who sells her dead mother's engagement ring, secretly, in order to raise money to pay a debt?"

"I'd think the girl was hard pressed—at the end of her tether," returned the other man succinctly. "You can't suppose she liked doing it—I'm taking for granted it's Valerie you mean—and if she really did, well, it was because the poor child had no alternative."

"Why couldn't she come to me in the first place?" Sir Eric's face was drawn with pain. "God knows how willingly I would have helped her—and all this would have been avoided! But no. She went her own way, deceiving me into thinking all was well with her, while all the time she was sinking deeper and deeper into this mass of deceit and lies. Upon my soul, I begin to wonder if there is a kink in the girl's nature—if she prefers crooked ways to straight dealing and honesty!"

"Not she!" The doctor turned towards the door as he spoke. "She's not the first woman by many a hundred who's made a slip—taken a false step, and not known how to retrieve it. The French proverb lies when it says it is the first step that costs. *That's* easy enough, worse luck! But it's the steps back that cost so much—and sometimes the cost of them is prohibitive!"

"Well, I'll write to Rossi. You'll see Val before you go?"

"No, it would only upset her. I'll go round to the club and see how things are. Possibly I'm exaggerating the menace—the rumours may not be so persistent after all. And if there is a chance of them dying down, well, there's hope for the child."

He went out, and Sir Eric sat down to write a note to Rossi. He asked him, briefly, to make it convenient to call upon the writer between four and five o'clock, and he dispatched his own man in the car with instructions to find Count Rossi if possible and bring back an answer from him.

Just after lunch, the man returned with a note from Rossi, in which the Italian promised to be at Sir Eric's flat at five o'clock precisely, and armed with this information Sir Eric sought his niece.

He found her sitting listlessly by the open window of her room, a luncheon tray on the table at her elbow; and as she turned towards him he was cut to the heart to see the apprehension with which she regarded his approach.

"Well, Val, I've written to Count Rossi." He tried to speak reassuringly. "And he will be here at five o'clock. I wish to speak to him, to find out his attitude in this unhappy affair. And when I know exactly what it is, I'll be able to deal with it better."

"Must I see him, Uncle Eric?"

"I don't know yet, Val. So much depends upon his behaviour."

"I've had a letter from Lady Thirsk," she said in the same apathetic tone, holding out a sheet of paper towards her uncle. "I don't think I know what she means. Will you read it and tell me what it's all about?"

With a premonition of evil at his heart, Sir Eric took the sheet and ran his eye reluctantly over Countess Chris' involved caligraphy.

"*Dear Valerie,*

"What have you been doing now? All Cairo is talking of your romantic love-affair with Rossi, and if all one hears is true, you've hoodwinked your poor dear uncle most successfully. But, *chérie,* you've been most terribly indiscreet. Rumour has it that you've spent days out at his villa, where none of *us* is admitted; and I even hear shocking whispers of midnight suppers, and motor rides lasting till all hours of the morning. Charitable souls suggest that you are secretly married, and I hope that may be the solution of the problem which is intriguing us all so awfully. Of course Rossi is fascinating, so handsome and mysterious, but still . . . well, I always said youth was amazingly courageous, and I'm confirmed in my wisdom. But what I am really writing about is this. We are to be photographed in our divers costumes at Lila's house on Friday morning next, and you, as Atalanta, are requested to be present. Of course you may not feel equal to facing us, you naughty little minx —but if you do, don't be later than eleven.

"Yours reprovingly,

"CHRIS."

Having reached the end of the letter, Sir Eric laid it down on the table and looked at his niece in silence.

"Uncle, what's it all about? It—does it mean they all know what I have done—what a fool I've been?"

"Yes, Valerie. I think they know everything there is to be known." He spoke bitterly. "Perhaps—more."

"But—what does it *mean*——?"

"I'm afraid it means that you will have to marry Count Rossi, Valerie," said Sir Eric heavily; and without another word he went out of the room and left her alone with her thoughts.

## XXII

"Well, Count Rossi, may I ask for an explanation of your conduct in this unhappy affair involving you and my niece?"

Sir Eric stood up, very erect and grim, before the Italian; and Rossi, who had been expecting this interview, and preparing for it, for some days, answered immediately.

"Sir Eric, I have a good deal to say—to explain. But first, may I tell you something? It is, I think, of importance in the matter."

Sir Eric, plainly surprised, gave permission stiffly, and Rossi proceeded to avail himself of it.

"As you may be aware, I was called away from Cairo a few days—a week ago, at literally the notice of a moment, to visit my mother, who was sick. Otherwise I should have given myself the pleasure of waiting upon you, sir———"

"Upon me?"

"*Sissignore.* Yes, Sir Eric. I had fully intended making a visit to you for the purpose of asking permission to press my suit—you forgive my clumsy English?—with your niece. For many weeks now we have been—not what you call so coldly 'engaged,' but—how then shall I put it?—we were in a relation to one another in which sympathy, love, were the main factors. For myself, I looked upon your niece as my Countess, my wife. And she, though adorably shy, deliciously modest, she accorded me now and again the privilege of a lover, permitted me to help her sometimes, to worship her always."

"We English prefer respect to worship, Count Rossi," said Sir Eric coldly, and Rossi's black eyes opened widely.

"*Ma, Signore!* I respect Miss Rivers as though she were indeed a saint! I have for her a—what shall I call it?—a veneration which many a plaster Madonna in her wayside shrine fails to receive even from the devout worshipper. And

I have also a love for her which no man, not even you, Sir Eric, may question."

"That's all very well," said Sir Eric brusquely, "but it does not alter the fact that you've behaved abominably. I suppose you know that all Cairo is talking of my niece. And although you appear to have given her good advice on one occasion"—Rossi wondered cynically what he meant—"you have certainly been wanting in discretion."

"You mean——"

"I mean in allowing my niece to visit your house at night. Come, Count Rossi, you call yourself, I suppose, a man of the world; and as such you must have known that you were doing a very wrong, very reprehensible thing when you persuaded a young girl to take a step of that kind."

For a moment Rossi said nothing, looking down with an air of contrition which did not escape the other's notice. Then Rossi looked up and said rather hesitatingly:

"Sir Eric, I admit I have been very wrong. But believe me, I have never failed in respect for Miss Rivers. On the few occasions on which she has honoured my house with her presence, she has been treated with all the deference, the chivalry to which her youth and innocence entitle her."

"I am not doubting that," said Sir Eric gravely. "But you know quite well that she should never have been allowed there at all."

"*Si, si.*" He spoke in a low tone, looking down as he spoke; and though for a moment Sir Eric wondered whether this apparent humility were genuine, his own tone was a little less cold as he said, quietly:

"Have you any excuse for your conduct, Count Rossi? I am only too anxious to find you able to justify yourself, in any way."

Rossi looked up; and now his mobile face was alive with feeling.

"Sir Eric—*Signore*, I have no justification save my love. I have acted wrongly, I admit it. I have been worse than foolish, I have sinned against the purest, the sweetest of girls. I have been careless, hasty, yet my intentions were good. I intended only to help Miss Rivers. The money, it was nothing. I thought no more of it. But for the rest—it was so great a temptation to me to think of seeing her in my home, to know, for one moment, a foretaste of the cquisite bliss which should be mine were she domiciled there for ever. She, innocent as she is, saw no harm in agreeing to my plan. Oh, I agree with all you say. Believe me, no words of yours, no condemnation can be harder than my own hatred of my folly. But—*per Dio, Signore,* when a man loves, he is apt to behave madly, [illegible]. And I——but I say no more! I have been very wrong, and I must endure your censure as best I may."

With a sudden gesture, very foreign in its unexpectedness, he took a letter from his pocket and held it out dramatically to Sir Eric.

"*Ecco, Signore!* Take it, I pray you and read. You read Italian, *si?* And you will then see this, that I at least, looked upon your niece as my future [illegible]."

"I can't read your private letters, Count Rossi." Sir Eric spoke coldly, but Rossi still pressed it on him so fervently that at length he took it fastidiously by one edge of the sheet, and looked with some disfavour at the flowing handwriting which covered the [illegible]

But in spite of himself his face changed as he read.

The letter was from the Countess Rossi, Paolo's mother; and was evidently in answer to one which he had written announcing his love for, and his imminent betrothal to, Miss Rivers. The Countess' letter was couched in terms which showed plainly that she was overjoyed at the news; and indeed Rossi had painted the match in such glowing terms that even the Countess' stern heart had relented towards her scapegrace son.

Very fortunately for Rossi, she had considered it beneath her dignity to make any allusion to the prospective bride's fortune, and she wrote only of her great and intense satisfaction [illegible] that Paolo had made so worthy a choice. [illegible] Rossi had heard of Sir Eric, it seemed, while the latter had held a diplomatic post at Genoa; and she professed [illegible] delight that her son should ally himself with so distinguished a family. She was even warm in her protestations of affection towards her hitherto erring son; and she wound up her letter with a request that he would render her felicitations to Sir Eric on this happy occasion which should lead, she hoped, to the union of two noble houses.

It was very evident from this letter that Count Rossi, at least, had looked upon his marriage with Valerie as certain; and Sir Eric frowned as he handed back the sheet.

"It evidently did not occur to you to speak to me before writing to your mother," he said with dignity. "Yet my consent to the match is yet to be won."

"Ah, but you will not refuse it!" Rossi started forward, his dark eyes glowing, his whole manner an admirable representation of the impatient lover. "Think, *Signore,* the happiness of our lives is at stake! Oh, Valerie is shy, timid, she hardly dares to breathe of her love—she is not bold as I am! Yet, for weeks past we have been betrothed—why, do you imagine for one moment that she would have confided in me, have accepted my poor aid in the moment of necessity, had she not felt the pure flame of love burning in her heart!"

Again Sir Eric's cold voice interposed to check this flow of garrulity; and Rossi fell back with an exclamation of despair.

"Quite so, Count Rossi. But unfortunately my niece does not appear so willing to marry you as you seem to imagine. Do I understand that you have talked of marriage—that she knows your hopes in this respect?"

"*Ma sissignore!*" His tone sounded genuine. "I have described my Italian home on the shores of the Mediterranean to your niece; we have spoken together of my mother, my sisters"—he had, indeed, mentioned them now and then in conversation—"and I had believed that Valerie looked forward to meeting them as much as they were anticipating making acquaintance with my bride. Indeed, Sir Eric, I had no other idea than that we were betrothed." He paused a moment, then launched a bold stroke. "If indeed I have been mistaken, if your niece has but been exercising the privilege of her sex in misleading me"—his voice broke artistically—"then naturally I can say nothing but *Addio*—and leave her—to make happy some better man. . . ."

Sir Eric looked at him in real perplexity. The Italian's protestations sounded sincere; and since Sir Eric had no reason to believe that he knew of Valerie's money, it was to be supposed that the love he professed was genuine. And against his will Sir Eric could not help believing that Valerie *had* encouraged the man. The whole story, from the first money transaction to the final visit to the villa, was so extraordinary, so incredible, that only a girl's romantic love could, or so it seemed to Sir Eric, account for these mysterious happenings. And if Valerie had indeed led Rossi to believe that she had accepted his love, and was ready to become his wife, she must be prepared to accept also the consequences of her own folly.

Since, too, all Cairo was laughing and whispering over the affair—Sir Eric had received one or two further shocks during his afternoon promenade, taken purposely to find how things really were—it seemed as though this marriage were inevitable. And although Sir Eric's heart was sad for his young niece, so early awakened to the fact that even folly must be paid for as heavily as sin, he had sufficient worldly wisdom to feel that she would be better equipped to face the future as the young Countess Rossi, wife of an Italian of high standing in his own country, the welcome daughter-in-law of a genuine aristocrat such as he knew the present Countess Rossi to be, rather than as the heroine of an unsavoury scandal, pointed at as a well-brought up young girl who had flung her cap over the windmill with a vengeance, who had made her name a byword in one of the most gaily malicious cities in the world before she had reached her nineteenth birthday.

That Rossi loved his niece seemed to him to be indisputable; and although his financial standing was at present obscure, that could be gone into at the proper moment.

One question, however, he must ask.

"Have you the means to support a wife, Count Rossi? Rumour has it that you have no particular fancy for thrift, that you spend more lightly than you save."

The younger man bit his lip with well-simulated confusion at this direct attack.

"*Signore,* I will be frank with you. I have hitherto spent money recklessly, culpably, I admit it. But a young man alone, with no ties, no obligations, he is led away by his equally irresponsible companions. But I shall have money—first on my marriage, when a third of the large income which my mother, may the Saints protect her! now enjoys, passes to me. And later, when she goes to her own place"—he crossed himself as he spoke—"all but a fraction of her wealth becomes mine absolutely."

"These facts can be verified?"

"But yes. I will give you, if you choose, the address of my mother's *avvocato*—her man of law, who will give you all the particulars you may need."

"There's another thing," said Sir Eric rather abruptly. "You are a Catholic, I suppose? Would there not be difficulties in arranging the match?"

"Difficulties, perhaps. But impossibilities, no. These things can be arranged. My mother has ever been a good daughter of the Church; and though the Holy Father would doubtless grieve over the alliance, since our family is one well-known in Italy, he will place no real obstacles in the way."

"Well, if my niece does marry you," said Sir Eric, with the brusqueness natural to Englishmen when they speak of religion, "I won't have any meddling with her faith. No proselytising, you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir." He bowed his head acquiescently; and Sir Eric sighed heavily.

"Well, well, I suppose it will have to be. That is, if Valerie consents. I shall not coerce her, you realise that? If she agrees to marry you, well and good. If not, then there is no more to be said."

"You will allow me to see Miss Rivers?" His tone was eager, his black eyes glowed.

"Of course. I will see if she will come to you now." Having made up his mind Sir Eric saw no reason for delay. "If you have spoken truly as to what has happened between you, you have the right to see her. Only"—for a moment his voice grew rough with feeling—"you will remember, Count Rossi, that Valerie is very young, scarcely more than a child; and you will treat her, if you please, accordingly."

"May the good God turn from me at the last if I betray your faith in me, Sir Eric." His Southern voice discounted the exaggeration of his words, and Sir Eric turned to the door.

"Remain here, and I will bring my niece to you," he said. "But you must be brief, Count Rossi. Valerie has been ill, and she is not yet fit for much strain."

A moment later he was gone, leaving Rossi standing by the table deep in thought. Everything seemed to be working out well. The scandal, set on foot by Desmond, had spread more rapidly, with more amplifications than he had expected; and it was evident to Rossi's shrewd mind that even Sir Eric, although he had no liking for his niece's suitor, saw in their marriage the most convenient solution to the problem by which he was faced.

The Countess Rossi, too, misled by her son's letters, was ready to welcome the girl whose family, apparently, wished for the alliance; and in the face of every circumstance Rossi did not think that Valerie would prove obdurate. He was clever enough to realise that Romney's engagement to Lady Lucia might be a powerful factor for good in his own case; and altogether Paolo Giovanni Rossi felt comfortably assured that before long Valerie, and her fortune, would be his—not, moreover, acquired in some hole-and-corner fashion, but given to him with the blessing of all concerned.

As he came to this pleasing conclusion, Rossi heard a door open behind him, and turning round beheld Valerie entering the room.

He started forward to meet her, and, taking one of her cold hands in his, bent gallantly over it and raised it to his lips.

"Valerie *mia!*" His tone was very gentle. "I grieve that you are not well—what has ailed you, sweet little one? And can it be true that you are indeed going to make me the happiest of men?"

She lifted her eyes to his, and in their depths he read a hopelessness which touched even his ruthless heart.

"My uncle has told you I am to marry you?" The question was strange, but he ignored its strangeness.

"Sir Eric is good enough to say that he will not refuse his consent to our marriage if you will honour me so far." He still spoke very quietly, with none of the passionate fervour she dreaded. "It remains for you to say the word—and I am pledged to abide by your decision."

She looked at him again, and now her eyes were wistful.

"You know they are saying dreadful things about me in Cairo?" She sighed. "Every one thinks I have been so foolish, so wicked. Those men—they told how they had seen me at the house, and every one knows about the money you lent me. This afternoon two people have written to me, making excuses to get out of doing things with me—riding and playing tennis; and it is because of what people are saying."

"And it is my fault, brute that I am!" He spoke with apparent heartiness, and for a moment her face relaxed little. "Valerie, will you believe me when I say that would have been cut into a thousand pieces before I ha allowed this trouble to fall upon you? But I have bee careless—worse than careless—and the only way in which can atone is, alas! distasteful to you!"

"You mean by marrying me?"

"Yes. *Le bon Dieu* knows I have no right to hope fo such bliss—yet—oh, *cara,* you know I love you—long fo you, would die for you! Can you not bring yourself to re turn good for ill, to give me happiness in return for th misery I have brought upon you?"

Suddenly, as he spoke, her thoughts veered to anothe subject, and she voiced it instantly.

"Count Rossi, when I left Lady Lucia's pearls at you villa—were they safe all night? I suppose no one touche them but yourself?"

Naturally bewildered at this sudden change of theme Rossi stared at her for a moment in silence. Then into hi eyes, veiled immediately, flashed a look of suspicion; but hi voice was quite calm as he finally answered her.

"But, *chérie,* who then should touch the pearls? The lay in my pocket all night, and in the morning, before leav ing Cairo, I despatched them to you by the hand o Luigi."

"And I returned them to Lady Lucia." She was sti looking at him rather oddly. "And that night I was in formed that the necklace had been tampered with, tha several of the pearls had been taken off the rope, and inferio ones substituted for them. And I, having had the pearls i my possession, was supposed to be responsible for the theft."

For a moment Rossi said nothing. This was seriou news. The more so that it was unexpected; and it struck him instantly as odd, if not ominous, that he himself ha heard nothing of the matter, which had, quite obviously been hushed up.

"These are strange tidings, Valerie." His face wa grave. "But how, then, had this forgery been detected It must have been but a clumsy piece of work."

"At first they said there should have been only one hundred and nineteen pearls on the string." She spoke wearily. "And when it was returned there were a hundred and twenty. So they looked closely and found the supposed fraud."

"You say—at first—and—supposed," he said rather quickly. "What do you mean, *chérie?* Was there no fraud after all?"

"No." She was not looking at him, or she must have seen the amazement in his face. "It was discovered later that Lady Lucia had made a mistake; and of course I was cleared from any suspicion."

"But"—in spite of himself he was overwhelmed with curiosity—"who had dared in the first place to mention the matter to you? Surely no one would dream of accusing you of so clumsy a theft?"

"I wasn't exactly accused," she said hesitatingly, "but Mr. Romney told me what had happened, and I——"

"You did not tell him that I had had the pearls in my possession all night?" By a gigantic effort of will he kept his voice quiet, almost gentle.

"No. But I believe he thought there was something odd about it." She sighed. "You see, I couldn't say much, except that I had always thought there were a hundred and twenty pearls on the rope, and he told me there were really only a hundred and nineteen."

"I see." He did see, and cursed the blunder in his heart. "Well, you protested your innocence, and then—what next?"

"The next day I had a note from Lady Lucia saying she had made a mistake, and that her pearls were intact."

"So!" By an effort Rossi hid his amazement. "The pearls are intact? But—how came Lady Lucia to make the error?"

"I don't know." Her voice was flat; and Rossi decided that the elucidation of the mystery could wait until he had more time to devote to it.

"Well, there is no harm done, my little Valerie. But now, let us turn to happier matters. Now that you are willing to marry me"—he ignored the shudder which passed over her at the words—"I shall make it my business, as it is my privilege, to guard you from all troubles of this, or any sort. But you are fatigued, weary. You wish me to go, to leave you to rest. *Non è vero?*"

"I *am* tired," she said drearily. "Somehow life seems so dreadfully complicated nowadays. Nothing is as it used to be."

"It will indeed be different presently." He took her hand in his and drew her gently towards him. "Valerie, you know I am your lover, that I adore you, worship you, would give my life to make you happy. Well, have you no word of kindness for me? I will be content with little—I am not an exacting lover. But—one word, one kind glance—is it too much to ask?"

He paused; and as she stood before him silently, her eyes downcast, he resolved suddenly on a bolder stroke.

"Little one"—his voice was tender—"tell me that I am not mistaken in thinking that you are ready to accept my devotion, to give me a fraction of your heart in return. There is no one else, dear little child—no one to whom your love has gone out, almost unknown to yourself? No, that cannot be, for no man could receive so great a gift without returning it a thousandfold."

He had acted with all the wisdom of the serpent; for the words could not but remind Valerie of the fact which in these hours of personal stress she had temporarily forgotten—the fact that Victor Romney, the man whom she loved, had almost deceived her into thinking he loved her, when all the while he and Lady Lucia were renewing the old affair in which, if rumour were true, neither he nor she had played too creditable a part.

Lady Lucia's engagement had come as a shock to Valerie—the more because in it she seemed to read confirmation of those bygone whispers to which she had resolutely turned a deaf ear. How could she have acted otherwise, indeed, when Victor's words, his looks, his half-uttered protestations had all assured her of his love for her? She had felt herself able to treat those slanders with the indifference they deserved, when all the time she felt herself loved by the man of whom the slanderers spoke. And though in any case Victor's defection must have inflicted a deep wound in her girlish heart, she could have borne it better had she not been forced to believe in his unworthiness; since it was all too evident that he had been ready to trifle with her until such time as Lucia Holland should condescend to listen to his request for a renewal of the old intimacy between them.

That Valerie's reading of the situation was incorrect was unfortunate—but natural; and as Rossi's words echoed in her brain she knew that her first object must be to hide from the world at large the fact that she had given her love to a man who had held the gift terribly, mortifyingly cheap.

She raised her eyes to Rossi's face, in answer to his subtle questioning; and in them he read resolve.

"There is no one else, Count Rossi. And I am willing to marry you when you choose."

Rossi, who could act with consummate art when he wished, took the announcement very quietly, with none of his usual *flamboyancy*. He did not even attempt to kiss her, but merely touched her hand with his lips; and then, reiterating his advice to her to rest awhile, he bowed himself quietly out, and sought a second, shorter interview with Sir Eric, which, for all its brevity, sealed Valerie's fate.

It did not take Rossi's shrewd brain long to understand the situation which had arisen after the discovery of the missing pearls. His quick mind, indeed, leaped unerringly at the truth. He did not yet know whether Romney suspected him of having handled the precious stones, but he guessed instinctively that Romney feared that Valerie, innocent though she might be, would inevitably be suspected; without, indeed, the power to clear herself credibly; and Rossi felt assured that to shield Valerie by winning Lucia's silence in the matter would be Romney's first endeavour.

That he must pay so heavy a price for her silence was unfortunate—for Romney. But Rossi shrugged his shoulders cynically as he reflected that so lovely a wife as Lucia Holland must surely teach any man to smother regret at his lot; and doubtless in time Romney would accept his fate philosophically.

Rossi's chief desire now was to wed Valerie without delay, since he could not but feel a trifle uneasy when he thought of the foundation of deception on which his house was reared; and he resolved to win Sir Eric's consent to a speedy marriage—in Cairo, if possible, before the summer migration to cooler lands took place.

He anticipated no trouble in the matter, since, if the marriage were, as it appeared to be, inevitable, the sooner it was carried through the better; and though Valerie was very young, her youth, with its attendant lack of discretion, was a very strong reason in favour of an early marriage.

So, as he went along the street, humming gaily, in his loud tenor voice—a habit of which he could not break himself—Rossi's mind was filled with pleasing visions of the future. And although it was already perilously near the sacred dinner hour, he could not rest until he had visited the establishment of M. Poiret, and had there selected a betrothal ring which was a marvel of beauty and antiquity.

## XXIII

Valerie's engagement to Count Rossi was announced on the day following her interview with the Italian; and Cairo society, which had already received one tit-bit, in the shape of Lady Lucia's betrothal to Victor Romney, forsook the earlier morsel in order to savour eagerly the second, and even more enticing *bonne bouche.*

For, although there had been a delicious hint of romance about Lucia Holland's annexation of the man who had formerly repudiated her claim, the stories which had circulated through the city in connection with Valerie Rivers, stories of borrowed money, of midnight visits to a certain villa, were a thousand times more intriguing; and the personality of Valerie herself, the young, bright-eyed, innocent-looking girl who had played the part of Atalanta so delightfully, was a piquant factor in the situation.

Few people, it is true, dared to congratulate Sir Eric on his niece's engagement. There was something aloof, unapproachable, about him in these days; and more than one shrewd observer noted that there were new lines in his face, fresh grey hairs round his temples, less spring and vitality in his walk.

And although he had no suspicion of the fact, his very gravity gave an air of credibility to the stories which were associated with Valerie's name. It was generally admitted that she had "gone the pace" with the young Italian. The more charitable of the gossips adduced Rossi's unmistakable good looks, his mysterious, romantic charm of manner, as attractions before which any young, impressionable girl might be expected to succumb. The more worldly asserted roundly that the girl was a minx, who had accepted the Italian's attentions greedily, dazzled by his name and connections; and that her wide, childish eyes, her general air of youthful candour and freshness, were but the cloak for a ruthless, greedy calculation.

Only a few women, here and there, felt it probable that the whole affair had been one of mere girlish ignorance and folly; and one or two blamed Sir Eric, not wrathfully, but in genuine distress, for his failure to look after his young niece, his inability to prevent her committing one foolish act after another.

But on one point all her acquaintances were agreed. Having, so to speak, lost her character, having compromised herself hopelessly with Count Rossi, she must marry him as fast as possible. There was positively no other course open to her; and though one could hardly suppose that the man who had been so careless of a young girl's reputation—to put it lightly—was likely to make the best of husbands, at least she would gain an established position, and, as Countess Rossi, would take her place in the best Italian society.

To her uncle's intense relief Valerie had accepted her fate without demur.

This thing had to be; and it was no use fighting against Kismet. For she had no champion, no one who would—or could—fight for her, for her happiness. She had thought once—how long ago it seemed!—that she could call upon Victor Romney to help her. She could not but remember the emotion in his tone, in his manner, when, having saved her from falling down the steps on the night of the

*Tableaux Vivants,* he had asserted that he could die for her. She could hear his voice, see the ardour which burned in his blue eyes, feel the touch of his hand on her bare arm—and yet a couple of hours later his engagement to Lady Lucia had been announced.

Of all the shocks which Valerie had experienced during the last few months this one had been the most severe. For weeks she had been unconsciously building a world about herself and Victor Romney, enclosing him, with her, in the secret places of her heart. Her instinct had told her, falsely it seemed, that Victor had learned to love her; and through all her mental worry, through all the gloom, the uncertainty, the apprehension which her affair with Rossi brought in its train, the thought of Victor had been like a guiding star on a dark and moonless night.

She could hardly, even now, believe that she had been altogether misled. There had been moments, precious, golden moments when she had felt herself to be very dear to Victor. There had been tones in his voice when he spoke to her, a look in his blue eyes as they rested on her, which was absent, surely, from his intercourse with others; and in the warm nest of her heart she had felt her own young love stirring, stretching up to meet this other, stronger love which should one day envelop her in its all-embracing tenderness.

But she had been mistaken. Cruelly, drearily mistaken. It was Lucia Holland whom Victor loved, Lucia with her wonderful beauty, her sapphire eyes, her alabaster skin, Lucia with her furs, her jewels, her marvellous gowns, her famous pearls.

But even in her thoughts Valerie turned away, shuddering, from the mental picture of a rope of gleaming pearls. . . .

Of the future, as the wife of Count Rossi, she dared not think. This monstrous fate was upon her, and apparently there was no escape. But in all her thoughts there was a sense of bewilderment. It seemed to her, now that her eyes were opened, that the rest of the world was culpably blind, inasmuch as no one was apparently able to realise that to force her to marry Count Rossi was, so far from redressing a wrong, merely piling Pelion on Ossa, loading her already burdened soul with an ever-increasing punishment.

It was not she who had done the wrong, but Rossi, Rossi who had taken advantage of her ignorance of the world, had forced her into a position from which there could be no escape. It was Rossi who had been the more to blame. Yet she, apparently, was to pay the price. And at the thought of that price, at the thought of her marriage with the man from whom body and soul shrank alike, Valerie's heart burned within her in a wild, impotent indignation against those, her so-called friends, who were content to cast her young life into the abyss which opened, terrifyingly, before her.

But there could be no revolt from the decree. Her uncle had sanctioned the marriage, had told her, with averted face and broken voice, that there was no alternative. For this was what Sir Eric, tortured by a hundred significant rumours, harassed even, sometimes, by dreadful doubts of his beloved Valerie, had come to believe.

For, throughout the whole affair he had felt instinctively that Valerie was keeping something from him; and since Valerie went in mortal fear that the story of the pearls might somehow come to light, bringing fresh shame, fresh humiliation in its wake, it was not to be wondered at that her manner towards her uncle was still confused and equivocal, nor that at times an even darker dread, a dread which he dared not put into words, shook Sir Eric's honourable soul to its foundations.

To Valerie, the substitution of the pearls was still, in its essentials, a mystery. But that Rossi knew something of the subject was undeniable; and in spite of Lucia's retraction of her first statement Valerie felt a horrid certainty that the rope *had* been tampered with while in Rossi's keeping; though what reason could prove strong enough to induce Lucia to keep silence on the subject was a mystery indeed.

For all her girlish cleverness, her native wit, Valerie never for a second envisaged the possibility of the bargain between Lucia Holland and Victor Romney.

To her the engagement was a proof, had she needed one, of man's weakness in the face of woman's determination; and what sane man, she asked herself drearily, would choose a silly, ignorant schoolgirl for a wife, when one of the loveliest women in the world was ready to honour him with her love?

But she hoped she would not be forced to witness the wedding of the man she had loved—did love—with all her heart; and the thought of her approaching departure from Cairo brought a little comfort to her sore spirit.

It was already nearly May—high time for the English visitors to leave Egypt. This year the season in Cairo had been prolonged in order to include the famous *Tableaux Vivants;* but several hotels, among them the Savoy, had closed their doors for the summer; and Lady Lucia, protesting faintly, had removed to the Semiramis, which was remaining open for a week or two longer.

Sir Eric was anxious to take his niece away from Cairo; and Count Rossi had offered a tentative suggestion that the journey home should be made *via* Naples so that he might have the felicitation of introducing Valerie to her future relatives in their own home.

He had indeed suggested that the wedding should take place in Italy; but for reasons of his own Sir Eric had decided that Valerie should be married in England; and Rossi had perforce given in—the more readily because Sir Eric had concurred in his wish for a June wedding.

After all, Sir Eric said to himself, there was nothing to be gained by delay; and since the present Countess Rossi was apparently unmoved by any rumours she might have heard concerning her son's bride-elect, it would perhaps be wise to acquiesce in Rossi's desire and break the journey in Naples as requested.

Accordingly, in company with Rossi he visited Cook's office to make inquiry as to accommodation, the result being that three berths were booked for the first Friday in May, that being the earliest date at which such accommodation could be procured.

After some discussion, Max Wynne and his partner had decided to close the "carpet-bazar" for the summer months; and while Max intended travelling to Persia to visit his family, Romney, having dutifully inquired Lady Lucia's wishes, found himself excused from the duty of escorting her home, since a friend of hers, a young Englishwoman married to a rich American, had invited her to make the journey on their luxurious yacht—a proceeding much more to Lucia's mind than an uncomfortable voyage on a crowded liner.

Their wedding was fixed, provisionally, for July; and it was with a sigh of relief that Victor realised that for a few weeks at least he would be free, free from the necessity of playing the devoted lover, free, if he so wished, to think—as, in spite of his efforts, he did frequently think—of the girl he had lost, through no fault of his own, but through her folly, and another's ruthlessness.

He counted the days, secretly, to Lucia's departure; and he told himself that once she had left Cairo he would take the first boat home, and spend what time yet remained to him alone by the sea, probably in Cornwall, where, face to face with the Atlantic, with its wide spaces, its splendid breezes, he might for a short space of time regain his free manhood, might be, for a while at least, the captain of his soul.

Victor was not the only person who thought of Lady Lucia's impending departure constantly in those warm, febrile days of April.

To another man, in another less inviting, more mysterious quarter of the city, the withdrawal of the lovely Englishwoman was fraught with a strange significance.

Lady Lucia did not know the man, had never, as yet, heard his name. But he took, or so it seemed, an odd interest in her movements.

All unknown to her, her comings and goings were noted by a pair of dark eyes, which hovered, however, less frequently on her beauty than on the adornments of that beauty.

When she drove through the streets of Cairo in her magnificent car, or, more rarely, strolled to the shops on foot; when she attended some function in all the pride of her half-careless, half-insolent loveliness; when she went, openly bored, to the Opera to hear an Italian company sing "Manon Lescaut"; or when, as sometimes happened, she gave a little dinner party out at Mena House; on all, or many, of these occasions her triumphal progress was noted by the above-mentioned eyes; whose owner, a small, elderly man, with delicate hands and a shy, retiring manner, would mingle unobtrusively with the passers-by, and efface himself unnoticeably when the famous beauty had disappeared from view.

Stefano Zanoni was the name of this shadowy personage; and it was he who had, at Rossi's request, substituted the inferior pearls for the five taken from Lady Lucia's noted rope of pearls.

Needless to say, Rossi had not taken Zanoni into his confidence in the matter. One of the greatest living authorities on pearls, the little Italian was a dreamer, an artist rather than a merchant: and while pearls were a passion with him he would not have consented to remove the real pearls had not Rossi represented to him that the lady who owned the magnificent string herself desired the substitution, for reasons which, so Rossi insinuated, concerned none of those destined to help her in the matter.

That even rich and lovely ladies were at times in need of money Zanoni understood plainly; for before drifting to Cairo he had been a well-known jeweller in Rome; and more than once he had come to the rescue of impecunious beauty by a little discreet juggling with stones—though it is to be recorded that his artistic conscience always rebelled against the substitution of inferior gems; and when he could he persuaded poverty-stricken aristocrats to sell outright and purchase smaller, less ornate gems of good quality rather than attempt to impose on the world by even splendid imitations of well-known stones.

It had gone to Zanoni's heart to tamper with Lucia Holland's pearls. He had seen them often enough since the wearer's advent in the gay city of the Nile to identify them easily; for Cairo is a hotbed of gossip, and the subject of Lady Lucia—and her pearls—was canvassed in the bazars and the native quarters with a freedom which would have startled her considerably had she known of the interest therein displayed; and Zanoni had made a point of viewing the lovely things for himself.

But although he had frowned on Rossi's proposal to substitute inferior pearls in accordance with Lucia's supposed desire, he had agreed, reluctantly, to do as he was asked; and it was not until he had actually handled the precious rope that his soul rose in revolt against the vandalism he was being asked to commit.

He had even ventured to suggest to Rossi that were the lady in desperate straits for money he would himself purchase half-a-dozen, or more, of the pearls for what she considered a fair sum; and since his object in so purchasing would be merely the gratification of his artistic sense he would guarantee to sell them back to her, within a certain time, with only the merest fraction of interest added to the original sum—just, so he said half-deprecatingly, to give the transaction an air of business.

To a man who did not know Zanoni, such a proposal might have appeared almost suspiciously advantageous. But while Rossi understood the real disinterestedness of the offer, it was an absolute impossibility from his point of view.

He explained carefully to the little Italian that Lady Lucia could not possibly allow the length of her rope to be altered, as it would be by the deletion of the pearls; and having painted a sufficiently convincing picture of beauty in distress, he finally won Zanoni's consent to the plan which, to the latter, was a sore offence against all his artistic ideals.

In one respect, however, Zanoni had deceived his patron. Knowing the former jeweller to have kept in touch with various rich and influential customers in different parts of the world, Rossi had imagined that Zanoni, failing to bargain with Lady Lucia, would sell the pearls, discreetly, to one or other of these customers; and since it was immaterial to Rossi whence the money—supposed to be for Lady Lucia, in reality for himself—came, he accepted the large sum offered by the jeweller without undue curiosity as to its source.

He would have been surprised had he known the truth—which was that Zanoni had himself paid the money in preference to the alternative of parting with the pearls, five in number, which he had taken from Lucia's string.

Of a naturally frugal disposition, the Italian spent little on himself in the matter of food and clothing; and more people than Rossi would have been amazed had they known of the snug little nest-egg which had been amassed in Rome during the years devoted to business.

Zanoni had no ulterior motive in thus deceiving Count

Rossi. The latter evinced no undue curiosity as to the ultimate destination of the pearls; and when once the money was in his possession he had dropped the subject.

One particular in the transaction had power to intrigue Zanoni deeply when he came to think things over. He had been prepared to swear that the string of pearls numbered one hundred and nineteen; yet Count Rossi with equal pertinacity asserted that there were one hundred and twenty; and had insisted on Zanoni making up the number, though of the sixth pearl the expert could find no trace. In his own mind he wondered, now and again, if Count Rossi himself knew something of the mystery of the sixth pearl. He was certain that he had not dropped it, nor, as might have happened, placed it among those he had brought with him from which to choose. Had he done so his quick eye would soon have picked it out from the rest; but he was absolutely convinced, in his own mind, that nothing of the sort had occurred; and since he could not really believe that Count Rossi was as much in the dark as he himself, he had judged it better to make no fuss, but to add a sixth pearl to the five he had so carefully substituted for the original ones taken from the string.

Had it not been for Rossi's blunder in thus making the number a hundred and twenty it is more than likely that the fraud would have escaped detection, so perfectly was it carried out; but the one flaw in the otherwise impregnable scheme had already led to consequences undreamed of by the originator thereof; and the history of Lucia's pearls was not yet complete.

One discovery was soon made by the shrewd Italian. Formerly, before the substitution had been effected, Lady Lucia had been in the habit of wearing her pearls incessantly, so that they seemed to be almost a part of her personality, as inseparable from her as her smile, her walk, the glance of her eyes. But now, on three days out of four she appeared without them; and Zanoni's quick mind sensed the reason easily enough—a dislike for the few spurious pearls which doubtless to her innate artistry rendered the whole magnificent string valueless.

Yet if this were so, why had she consented, in the first place, to the desecration? Never for an instant imagining that the transaction had been carried out without Lady

Lucia's knowledge, Zanoni could not understand why a woman of such apparent wealth should commit so great a crime against the god of taste for the sake of a few hundreds of pounds. And as he meditated on the affair, he even asked himself if it were not a regrettable fact that so glorious a thing should be in the hands of a woman who had proved herself so careless, so unworthy a custodian.

As he sat in his narrow room high above the city, gloating over the five beautiful pearls, a great longing rose within the Italian's heart—a longing to possess the rest of their exquisite brothers and sisters. He told himself, quite justly, that he was the one man in the world capable of treasuring them rightly, the man to whom the appeal of their beauty was overwhelming, the man who could value them not only for their intrinsic monetary value, but for their seemliness, their adorable shimmer and lustre and gleam.

Wild thoughts flashed through his brain as he dwelt, in fancy, on the beautiful things. At one moment he was ready to go to Lady Lucia, offer her the savings of a life-time in exchange for her famous pearls. Yet he, expert as he was, knew well enough that their price was far beyond his means; and though he would willingly have stripped himself of every penny he possessed, even so his little store would have fallen short of the value of the gems he coveted.

As he sat alone in the heavy warmth of the early summer days the thought of the pearls became almost an obsession. He could not get them out of his head. Day and night the lovely things floated before his eyes, tantalising them with their beauty; and again and again he took the five he already had from their hiding place and fingered them lovingly, his delicate hands lingering over their perfection, while his dark eyes drank in their symmetry, their warm and living sheen.

In all his life Zanoni had never known a desire like this. He had lived a hard-working, honest life, brightened by the reflections of the romance with which all jewels are invested; and he had been content to add a modest gem, now and then, to his own private store, in which no flawed, no inferior stone was deemed worthy of a place.

He had always loved pearls more than any other jewel; and had collected a few, here and there, which had hitherto given him much pleasure. But the five which had belonged to Lady Lucia put those other pearls to shame. They were well enough, but these were almost disturbing in their beauty; and as he handled them caressingly Zanoni, good Catholic though he was, told himself passionately that to possess the rest of them he would be prepared, almost, to yield up his hope of Paradise.

He longed, with an intensity which surprised himself, for another view—at close quarters—of the famous rope. He wanted to touch it, to let the precious pearls trickle through his fingers, to hold up the shimmering cascade and feast his eyes on their milky whiteness.

The desire to see them again was fast becoming a torture to him; and wild, chaotic plans floated through his brain—plans in which he made his way, somehow, into Lady Lucia's presence, strange, half-waking dreams of taking them from her, of hiding them in his bosom, of fleeing with them to some secluded village on an Italian hillside, where, apart from the world of men, he might pass long and blissful days in the mere contemplation of their shining loveliness.

Yet try as he might he could formulate no plan for intruding on Lady Lucia's privacy; and had not Fate come to his aid, it is probable he would have conquered, in time, the craving which was turning his calm, well-ordered life into a veritable chaos—a wild, mad state of longing for the unattainable.

One afternoon, returning from a solitary stroll through the bazars, Zanoni was greeted by his young Maltese servant, who appeared to be in a state of excitement unusual to him.

A telephone message had come for the master, he said in his broken Italian, asking him to call that evening at the Semiramis on a matter of business. He was to ask, it appeared, for a certain Lady Hobson—that, the Maltese thought, was the name given over the wire; and the number of the room was added as a further means of identification.

Seven o'clock was the hour fixed for the appointment; and although the affair threatened to break in on his everlasting brooding over the coveted pearls, Zanoni decided to accede to the request, which probably related to some quite unimportant little transaction for which he had been recommended by a former patron.

At seven o'clock, neatly dressed in his well-worn black suit, Zanoni presented himself at the hotel; and having explained his business was desired to wait in the hall until the unknown client's wishes were ascertained. There was a little doubt as to the name being correctly given by the caller; but the number of the room having been verified, Zanoni was presently requested to enter the lift *en route* for the apartments of his summoner.

He was shown into a large, luxuriously furnished sitting-room overlooking the river, and was standing by the window gazing dreamily out at the sunset sky when a voice recalled him to earth with some abruptness.

"You are Signor Zanoni?" Turning, he found himself face to face with Lady Lucia Holland. "I sent for you on a little matter of business, your name having been given to me by Major Cardew, a well-known jewel expert and a friend of mine——"

She broke off suddenly.

"What is the matter?" She had been speaking in Italian, but now she relapsed into French. "Are you ill? Sit down and I'll get you a glass of water."

"No, no, Madame, it is nothing, I assure you." He had turned a ghastly colour as he recognised her, but now he was regaining his usual composure, and his eyes were fixed, not on her face, but on the silver box she carried in her hand. "The day has been hot, and I am not a young man."

"Well, sit down here, by the window." She indicated a chair, but Zanoni stood before her without attempting to obey her command, and after a momentary pause she accepted the situation.

Opening the box she held, she lifted out the rope of pearls.

"I am told you know more about pearls than most men." She spoke languidly. "And if so, these may interest you. They are rather wonderfully matched, and graduated, I believed; and they are valued at a large sum."

She held out the pearls; and Zanoni's delicate hands trembled as he took them, gently, from her.

"Verily they are worth a king's ransom, Madame. The lustre, the sheen——"

He broke off, realising his *betise;* and indeed Lady Lucia was looking at him in surprise.

"You have formed your opinion rapidly, M. Zanoni. You have hardly glanced at the pearls."

Into Zanoni's quick mind darted a strange suspicion. Surely Lady Lucia must know that it was he who had substituted the inferior pearls for the more valuable ones. True, no names had been mentioned by Count Rossi; but Zanoni had concluded that this was merely a prudent reticence, and he had not supposed it would be extended to the principal in the affair.

For a second he feared a trap; and when he replied to Lucia's last sentence he spoke warily.

"Miladi, it is not the first time I see these jewels. I have seen you wear them, not once, but many times—at the Opera, in the street. And I have longed, with all the fervour of my soul, to touch, to handle the beautiful things."

"Really?" She appeared to accept his explanation without demur. "Well, now I want you to look at them closely and tell me if there is any among them which seem to you to be of less value than the rest—any which might with advantage be removed from the string."

Bewildered at her request—for even yet he could not believe that she was in ignorance of his identity, Zanoni bent his head over the pearls, wondering within himself what new move was imminent in the game in which he had already taken a hand. He was utterly at sea. Why Lady Lucia Holland should send for him at all was a fact altogether beyond his comprehension, since she must know of the part he had played in the substitution of the pearls.

Stay, though. *Was* it an established certainty that her ladyship was cognizant of the arrangement made between himself and Count Rossi? Suppose she did not know to whose hand she owed the lessening value of her noted pearls? It was possible that Rossi had carried out her behest without enlightening her as to the details thereof; and possibly her request to him was made in good faith, as an additional testimony to the deftness with which the substitution had been effected.

As he pretended to examine the shining pearls, Zanoni was forming a plan in his head; and having decided to accept the part she assigned him, he presently looked up from his task and spoke slowly.

"There are here several pearls, Miladi, which are distinctly inferior to the majority. Five—no, six, of them. And though the inferiority is not sufficiently marked to be taken note of, save by one who, like myself, has devoted a lifetime of study to the subject, to an expert the contrast between these—and these——" he emphasised the point with a slender forefinger—"jumps to the eyes at once."

"Six! Yes. I thought so." Lucia spoke meditatively, and Zanoni glanced for a second from the lovely pearls to the no less lovely face beside him. "Well, M. Zanoni, I want you, if you please, to take those inferior stones off the rope, which will then require restringing. And as I understand you are the person to apply to for the latter, will you be good enough to carry the business through for me?"

For a second the room swam round Zanoni, and he saw the pearls as it were through a mist. Could it be possible that he was to be allowed to take the precious thing away with him, to make a glory of his dull little room, to lighten with their shimmer a few hours at least of his grey life? Was he to be permitted to finger them as he would, to feast his eyes on their gleam, to dissever the false pearls from the true, to remove the blemish which flawed the perfection of the whole? True, the moment must come when he would be forced to return them to their owner, when the glory would fade from his room, the bliss from his life. Yet for a few hours at least he would dwell in Paradise; and with a mighty effort of will Zanoni replied in a quiet and controlled voice which betrayed no hint of his strong inward excitement:

"I will do Miladi's bidding with pleasure." He straightened himself as he spoke, and for the first time looked fully at the beautiful woman before him. But to his eyes, obsessed with the vision of the pearls, her beauty made no appeal; and though the innate artistry of his soul recognised her perfection, it left him cold as the contemplation of some ice-cold marble might have done.

"You will make haste with the work?" Lucia spoke casually. "I am leaving on Friday for Helouan, where I spend the week-end, and early next week I leave Cairo for good. Can you restring the rope by Friday morning, and let me have it before I leave, at midday, for Helouan?"

"*Oui, Madame.*" His voice was steady, though in his heart he grieved that the glory was to be his for so short period. "On Friday, at midday, I will return your pearls. And, if I may say so, Madame, you do well to remove the spurious gems from your so magnificent necklace."

"Very well, then." Lady Lucia turned towards the doo as a sign that the audience was concluded. "The rope wil be shortened, of course, but that can't be helped. And——" she spoke rather slowly—"you understand, don't you, tha the pearls are worth a good deal of money? I mean that in giving them into your care I am accepting my friend's guarantee that they will be safe in your keeping."

"Miladi, your pearls are a sacred charge to me." His earnestness impressed even Lucia. "May the good God cast me for ever into outer darkness if I fail to guard these gems—if need be, with my life!"

For a second Lucia's sapphire eyes rested on his face, with a trifle of amazement in their blue depths. He had spoken so fervently, with a fervour out of keeping, one would think, with the subject under discussion; and she experienced a fleeting sensation of wonder as to whether she had acted wisely in entrusting her jewels to this strangely excitable person of whom she knew nothing.

But her friend Major Cardew was a safe guide, and he had assured her that this queer little Italian was trustworthy; and she dismissed the doubt from her mind, and the man from her presence, with all her own superb confidence.

Had she seen Zanoni a couple of hours later as he sat, with doors and windows closed, at his small table, regarding the pearls which lay in a shimmering cascade on the faded blue cloth, she might again have experienced a fleeting doubt as to his sanity.

For his face was that of a devotee who worships before a shrine; and from time to time queer broken snatches of something like prayer, fragments of sentences, odd, half-inarticulate murmurs, issued from his lips.

Now and again he touched the pearls with his sensitive finger tips; and as he did so his face would turn white with the intensity of his inner emotion.

Not until the stars were pale ghosts in the sky, and the East was flushing with the first scarlet of dawn, did Zanoni's strange vigil come to an end. And when at length he slept, one hand lay always on the leather case beside him containing the pearls which had played, were destined yet to play, so strange, so tragic a part in the lives of those with whom they came in contact.

## XXIV

On the Saturday following Lady Lucia's departure for Helouan Sir Eric took his niece to dine at Mena House.

The weather was already unseasonably hot, and Sir Eric blamed himself for having kept Valerie in Cairo so long; but their berths were now booked for departure, and a few days more would not hurt the girl, providing that she were kept from undue exertion.

The little expedition to Mena House was his own suggestion; and Valerie had fallen in with the idea with something of her old enthusiasm, an enthusiasm which seemed to have forsaken her of late.

"We won't ask Rossi, Val. We'll slip off by ourselves, shall we?" Her look of pleasure rather startled him, but it was too late to draw back. I'll have the car round at seven and we'll go and have a last jaunt together. It will be like old times."

"Oh yes, Uncle Eric!" She clasped her hands round his arm in the old gesture. "Just the two of us together. It will be the last time I shall go to Mena House and see the Sphinx!"

"Well, for the present, anyway. But you'll come to Cairo again some day, Val."

"No." She moved away as she spoke, and her voice had lost its ring. "I don't think I shall ever come to Cairo again. I hope I shall not."

Sir Eric was too wise to press for an explanation of her hope. In his heart he knew quite well that his niece was not happy; and he fancied he knew the reason for her unhappiness. But since her marriage with Rossi was inevitable—and about that there could be no two opinions—it were wiser to ignore her tentative murmurs; and after all, since Rossi was genuinely in love with her—for Sir Eric had still no idea of Rossi's knowledge of Valerie's prospective fortune—there was no reason why in time she should not grow to love him in return, to make the best of a lot which other women might well envy.

So in response to her last sentence Sir Eric merely pulled out his watch and affected to find the hour later than he had expected.

" Run and dress, Val, and don't forget a wrap. It will be cool later on, and in any case you'll want something for motoring."

The evening was full of enchantment as the two sped along the broad road leading to Mena House. The sun had set with less flamboyancy than usual, as though the long golden hours of daylight had exhausted even his exuberance; and in the west a band of green and violet light testified to the gentle melancholy of his passing. The moon was waning, and would not rise till late; but the air was full of the clear, transparent light which takes the place of dusk in Egypt, where the transition from day to night is brief and complete, without the lingering twilight of our northern climes.

It was not until Sir Eric and Valerie had nearly finished their meal that the latter caught sight of a face she knew.

A large party had been dining at a table immediately adjacent to theirs, effectually blocking out all view of the restaurant; but when they rose it was possible to see the other diners; and with a leap of the pulses Valerie saw Victor Romney sitting facing her at a small table at a short distance from her. He was not alone. Max Wynne was with him, and two other men whom she did not know; and as she caught Victor's eye Valerie felt herself turn pale, while her hands grew cold and for a moment a mist veiled everything from her eyes. Luckily Sir Eric was not looking at her; and with a great effort she regained composure sufficiently to acknowledge Victor's greeting calmly.

"Who's that, Val? Oh, Romney, is it? And young Wynne. I want a word with him about sending home that rug I bought. We'll catch them after dinner, shall we?"

"Yes." Her voice was low; and only Valerie herself knew how her heart thrilled in her breast in anticipation of the meeting.

For Victor had given no sign that he knew of her impending marriage. Others had congratulated her; but not he. And in secret she had counted the days to her departure, wondering tremulously whether she would see him once more before leaving Egypt. For in spite of everything, in spite of his engagement to Lady Lucia, her own engagement to Rossi, she could not believe that he was absolutely indifferent to her welfare. And though events seemed to prove that he had not cared for her as his words, his looks, had almost made her believe, at least they might part friends. And to hear his voice, to see the expression in his blue eyes as he looked at her, to feel his hand on hers; would perhaps give her courage to face the future which at present looked so darkly menacing to her young eyes.

As they sat in the hall after dinner, Romney approached them quietly; and Sir Eric held out a kindly hand in greeting.

"Haven't seen you for ages, my boy. We're off home next week, you know."

"Are you, Sir Eric?" Possibly Victor had expected the announcement. "Well, it's getting late for Cairo, and I dare say Miss Rivers"—he did not look at her—"will be glad to get to a cooler climate."

"Yes. We're going home quietly, stopping in Italy for a few days *en route.*" He was selecting a cigar as he spoke and did not notice the expression on his hearer's face. "I suppose you'll be off too, presently. By the way, if Wynne can spare a moment I want to ask him how to pack off that Bokhara rug I bought from you. But not if he's busy, you know. Another time will do."

"He's not busy, Sir Eric. We came out to dine, and met a couple of friends. But I'm sure he will be pleased to fix up the matter for you."

"Well, bring him along when he can spare a minute. We're not staying long—Valerie mustn't be out too late."

For the first time Victor looked at Valerie; and his heart contracted within him as he noted the change which the last

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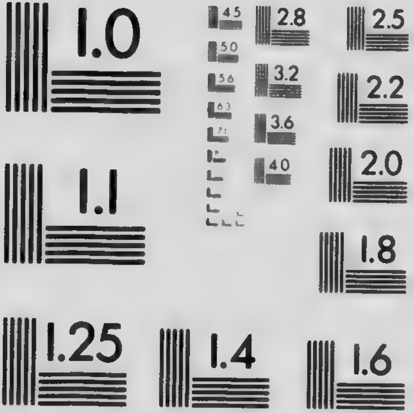

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few weeks had wrought in her. Gone was the radiant Atalanta whom he had loved, the joyous, light-hearted girl overflowing with vitality, with the very spirit of youth and gaiety.

Here, instead, was a pale, large-eyed girl whose listless expression was at variance with the freshness of her colouring, the sparkle of her gold hair. It was as though a weary, age-worn spirit masqueraded in the guise of a pretty and charming girl; and in her eyes he read a hint of tragedy which startled him. Naturally Victor had heard the things which were said about her; and although he would have staked his life on her innocence, he could not help wondering, at times, what reason could have been sufficiently strong to compel her to accept Count Rossi's proposal.

He was not fatuous enough to suppose that her engagement to the Italian was in the nature of a counterblast to his own engagement; but he could not bring himself to believe that she loved Count Rossi; and he wondered, not once, but a thousand times, what pressure had been brought to bear upon her which could make her consent to marry the man.

As he looked at her to-night he felt a sudden overwhelming desire to hear the history of her engagement from her own lips, and a plan sprang up, full-fledged, in his mind, which he hastened to put into execution.

With a word of apology he left the pair abruptly, and went in search of Wynne. Having detached him from the society of his friends he brought him in triumph to Sir Eric; and when the preliminary greetings were over he turned quite openly to Valerie.

"Would you care to come for a stroll, Miss Rivers? It is a lovely night, and we can see the moon rise over the desert."

She hesitated for a moment, but Sir Eric came to the rescue unwittingly.

"Yes, go for a little walk while I talk business with Mr. Wynne, Val. But don't be long—ten minutes or so will see us through, and we must get back after that."

"Just long enough for a look at the Sphinx," chimed in Max. "Though I expect Miss Rivers has seen it so often she's sick of it by now."

"Get your coat, Val," advised her uncle as she rose, slowly, from her seat. "It's warm, of course, but you mustn't run any risk of catching cold."

She went in search of her wrap obediently; and when she returned Victor was waiting for her by the great hall door.

He said nothing until they were outside in the starlit night. Then he turned to her with just a hint of emotion in his purposely quiet tone.

"Do you care to see the Sphinx, Miss Rivers? Or shall we go to the other side of the hotel and look over the desert instead?"

"Yes. Let us go to the desert."

Her voice was low, and he could not guess how her heart throbbed as she walked gently beside him through the garden to where, on the very edge of the desert, a couple of chairs invited them to rest.

"Dare you sit down? It's very warm, but still——".

For answer she sat down, drawing her white coat round her; and after a minute he took the other chair.

For some time neither spoke. The moon had risen at last, and hung, a silver ghost, in the heavens, surrounded by big, brilliant stars amid whom her wraith-like crescent seemed curiously insignificant. She gave little light in this, her last quarter, but the stars made up for her temporary eclipse by their sparkle and shimmer; and in their glow the desert lay like a lovely, delicate symphony in pale mauves and silvers, the little hills which here and there broke the uniformity of the sand casting a deeper violet shadow which gave value to the fragile beauty of the colour-scheme.

The night was very still. Far away a jackal barked faintly; and from a pool on the other side of the hotel a chorus of frogs rose harshly, and died away with equal suddenness. Once too, a small thing, possibly a sand partridge, fluttered over the sand and disappeared behind a tiny tamarisk bush; but for the most part the desert was silent; and insensibly Valerie's sore spirit gave itself up to the soothing influences of the starry night.

Presently Victor spoke; and though he did not know it the spirit of the desert was upon him too.

"What a glorious night, isn't it? It will be something for us to remember when we are back in England, won't it? I wonder if we shall find our own skies very grey, our own sun and moon very feeble, after these?"

She answered him slowly.

"I would a thousand times rather live in England than in Egypt. But——I shan't live in England, you know. I shall have to live in Italy."

The cigarette he had just extracted from his case fell to the sand at Victor's feet; and he stooped to pick it up before replying.

"Of course." His voice was a little hurried. "I had forgotten—for the moment—that you were to be married. And that reminds me that I have not yet congratulated you on your engagement to Count Rossi."

He did not look at her as he said the words; but so long a silence ensued after he had spoken that he stole a glance at her at last. She was gazing over the desert with an expression in her face which he could not fathom Perhaps it was the starlight which made her look so pale, drew such shadows under her eyes, tightened the lines of her soft mouth. Instead of Atalanta she might have sat for a statue of tragedy; and suddenly Victor found himself wishing that she would speak, say something, anything, to break up the stony immobility of her pose.

He had almost resolved to speak again when she turned towards him slowly; and now he knew it was not alone the starlight which had drained the youth and colour from her face.

"Thank you, Mr. Romney. But there is no reason why you should congratulate me on my engagement to Count Rossi."

Taken aback, Victor could only stare at her.

"But I thought——"

"That I was in love with Count Rossi?" There was a strange note of weary scorn in her young voice. "Mr. Romney, don't you know the truth? How I made such a fool of myself, *compromised* myself"—the word rang oddly—"so badly that I had to accept Count Rossi's offer of marriage to save my own reputation?"

"Miss Rivers, I——"

"You couldn't think I loved him, could you? Why"—for a second her voice shook—"for months I tried to escape! If I had not been such a fool—hadn't taken his money, been to his house, I might have gone free. But I did all those things—tell me"—she turned suddenly on him—"didn't you hear all the stories about me, all the horrible things they said of me—in the clubs and everywhere?"

"Cairo is always a hotbed of gossip——"

"Yes. But in this case the gossip was true. I did do all the things they said I had done. I did go to his house, did take his help, but I never meant any harm. You believe me, don't you? *You* know I never meant to be bad—or wicked! I was only silly, only a fool—and I'm being punished as though I were the veriest criminal on earth!"

She sprang up as she spoke, and her voice vibrated with passion. For a second Victor sat staring at her; and before he could speak she was off again.

"He meant, from the first, to get me into his power. Oh, I can see that now, but I couldn't then. And if only I had had some one to help me, to tell me what to do—but I was all alone, and so frightened, and he laid traps for me. I know that it must have been he who changed Lady Lucia's pearls—if they were changed——"

"Valerie!" Springing up Victor seized her arm. "What do you mean? You know he took the pearls—Rossi? But then—*you* knew nothing of them—you could have cleared yourself if necessary—if it had come out?"

Bewildered, shaken by passion, she stared at him; and in the starlight both their faces were very pale.

"But—of course! At least—I should have had to confess I'd forgotten the pearls, had left them with Count Rossi on that night——"

"He had them all night?"

"Yes. And that was why I was so terrified lest I had to say what I'd done with them. But surely *you* never thought I had stolen the pearls?"

Her question cut him to the heart; for he knew that in his inmost soul he had suspected her, not of the theft, God forbid! but of complicity in the theft—or, to put it less bluntly, of some knowledge thereof. And he saw, in one illuminating moment, that had he dared to let the thing go through, Valerie's innocence of aught save carelessness would infallibly have been established, and his own sacrifice rendered unnecessary.

True, her lack of discretion would have met with much and prolonged censure; but had he stood firm he would have been free to take up her cause, would even now have been in the position to champion her, by right, against the world.

"No, Valerie." He put his hands on her shoulders and forced her to look at him. "I didn't think that. But I did think—God forgive me!—that you knew something about the pearls, and because I was afraid for you I persuaded Lady Lucia to let the matter drop without making an enquiry, as at first she threatened to do."

"Then"—her eyes looked into his, and he read therein the dawning of her womanhood—"if I had told you the truth that night you would have stood by me? If you had known that I dared not admit having let the pearls out of my possession because I was afraid my visit to the Villa would come to my uncle's ears, would you still have believed in me? Still have looked on me, not as a bad, abandoned girl, who visited men's houses at night, but as a poor, bewildered child who didn't know which way to turn to escape the consequences of her own folly?"

Victor's hands tightened on her shoulders.

"My God, Valerie, don't talk like that! If I had only dared to trust you, had forced you to tell me the truth that night, all this coil would have been avoided. *I'd* have dealt with Count Rossi for you. If he had proved implacable your uncle should have known everything. But I think I could have settled Rossi. And if I had known he had had the pearls that night there would have been no further trouble—from him! And instead of that you're to marry Rossi, and I'm to marry Lucia—and God knows what will be the result of two such marriages!"

He dropped his hands from her shoulders and turned away abruptly, unable to bear the sight of her quivering face. But she put out her hand and caught him resolutely by the arm.

"Mr. Romney—what do you mean? You'd have championed me—have taken up my cause against Rossi, against"—she hesitated—"Lady Lucia? But—there wasn't any reason why you should——"

"Yes, Valerie, there was, and you know it." He faced her again, and in his blue eyes she read something which turned her cold with apprehension, even while her pulses leaped with some queer, unanalysed emotion. "You know quite well that I was in love with you—have been in love with you for months—ever since I came to Cairo. Oh, don't pretend you didn't know! Why, every word I said, every time I looked at you, I gave it away, and I'd made up my mind to speak when the Tableaux were over. And then I heard rumours about Count Rossi, and I wondered if I had been mistaken in thinking that you cared a little bit for me. I meant to clear things up quickly—I wasn't going to hang about too long. But before I could say anything the affair of the pearls came along. Lucia swore you knew all about it, that you were in debt, had borrowed a lot of money from Rossi, and saw a way of paying back what you owed. She made it all sound very plausible, and she threatened all sorts of terrible things if she could prove you had taken the pearls. And I persuaded her to wait while I questioned you—you remember how I asked you about the pearls and you put me off? I can see now that I was a fool, but your manner was —well, odd, wasn't it?—and I jumped to the conclusion that you were not anxious to have the matter investigated."

"I wasn't—but I never dreamed *you* could suspect me of stealing the pearls."

"I didn't, dear. But I thought I was carrying out your wishes in hushing up the matter; and so when Lucia agreed to let it drop—on conditions—I accepted her conditions without argument."

"Conditions?" She whispered the word beneath her breath, staring at him the while; and he realised that she had grasped part, at least, of the truth.

"Yes." He spoke steadily. "Perhaps there's no need to go further into the question; but since I was willing to accept her—her demands, she was ready to stand by her bargain."

"Victor." For the first time she called him by his name; and in the pale, delicate starlight her young beauty was strangely spiritualised. "What were Lady Lucia's conditions? Did they—did they exclude my—my friendship with you?"

"Yes, Valerie." He spoke as simply as she had done. "Lady Lucia's plans were such as to exclude, quite effectually, any hope of friendship with you."

"You mean——"

"I mean that Lady Lucia was good enough to express her willingness to become my wife."

"I see." For a long second she was silent, gazing over the violet and silver lights and shadows of the desert. " So *that* was why you asked Lady Lucia to marry you. But "—she looked at him closely—" you were—in love with her, I suppose? *I've* heard rumours too—about you and Lady Lucia, long ago, in England. And I suppose you have been in love with her for years? "

" You don't suppose anything of the kind." He spoke roughly. " Valerie, you've got the truth out of me at last. For heaven's sake be content with it. Don't ask me any more questions. The thing's done, and if I've made a mistake, God knows I've done it with the best intentions. Only "—he caught his breath—" it seems hard that after all neither of us is to be happy."

Suddenly he felt her hand on his arm, and, turning, found her, her eyes transfigured with a great light, looking him in the face.

" But—I'm happy—now ! " She spoke breathlessly. " Don't you know why? When I thought I was mistaken, that you had never meant your looks, your words, the things you said and did, why, then I was miserable, thinking you'd only been playing with me. And when I heard, on the night of the *Tableaux,* that you were engaged to Lady Lucia I thought my heart would break, and I got engaged to Count Rossi almost without thinking. You see, I had lost you, and nothing mattered."

She paused, but Victor had no words with which to meet this revelation ; and after a second she continued her speech.

" But now that I know you did mean it—that you did care for me—why, nothing else matters in the world. And though I suppose I shall still have to marry Count Rossi, it won't be half so hard to go on living. But "—for a second she faltered—" what about you? What will you do? If you—if you're not in love with Lady Lucia——"

" That can't be helped," he said steadily. " Valerie, dear, I think I've only made matters worse by telling you the truth. You see, we have both given promises, have both pledged ourselves to fulfil certain obligations ; and although we have both made mistakes, I'm afraid we must each stand by our word. True, you might refuse to marry Rossi, though I'm afraid your uncle would be very much against you doing so ; but I couldn't throw Lucia over—now."

" Of course not." In her heart she knew Lady Lucia would never let him go. "But somehow things seem so much easier now. And since you, at least, have acted splendidly, I think you will be happy again some day. As for me, well, I must do my best. And to know that you—that you were fond of me will help me a lot, I expect."

"You realise that we mustn't meet again?" Victor spoke hoarsely, and she looked at him in some alarm.

"We—we mustn't?"

"No." His self-control was leaving him. "Good God, Valerie, don't you know even yet what a man is? I can give you up—I must, I'm in honour bound to Lucia—but I can't go on seeing you, talking to you, when all the time I want to take you in my arms, carry you off somewhere where I can have you to myself. If we went on meeting, there'd be a catastrophe one day. At least—I couldn't trust myself, and I expect I'd be able to make you forget everything too. And to make love to another man's wife doesn't come within my code of things. So when we say good-bye it means just that—good-bye for always."

He heard her draw a long breath, and for a moment temptation shook him to the soul. But the thought of Lucia came to him, and although he did not love her, he would not willingly betray her trust in him.

Very gently he took Valerie by the arms and looked down into her face; and as their eyes met there was in each the same look—the look of the lover who bids an eternal farewell to the beloved at the bidding of the clean and honourable instincts of the soul.

"Good-bye, Valerie." He dared not trust himself to kiss her, even once. "God knows I hope you may find happiness. And for my part the thought that it was done for you takes away any bitterness in my own lot."

"Good-bye, Victor." She was shivering now, and she had a strange fancy that inwardly she must be bleeding to death beneath the agony of this parting. "I shall never forget to-night. And I hope—oh, how I hope you may be happy, for you deserve it, and I don't."

"Now," he said quietly, "we'd better go. You're shivering—I believe the breeze has grown chilly after all."

"One moment." She turned back to the desert, and sent a long, lingering look over the vast empty space which stretched in illimitable leagues of mauve and black and silver on every hand. "I must say good-bye to the desert, too. When one thinks—it has lain there for countless ages . . . our few years are nothing when you think of that. And in time I suppose this life of ours will be over . . . but the desert will still be there. . . ."

Another moment she stood, gazing out, with something of the aloofness of Eternity in her eyes; and even Victor could not guess how many hopes and dreams—the dreams and visions of girlhood—she was leaving behind her in this desert land.

Only when she turned to face him again, he thought that she had grown older in the space of a single hour.

Walking in silence over the sand, side by side, they re-entered the hotel garden; and ten minutes later Victor had said good-bye to Sir Eric and to Valerie for, as he honestly believed, the last time, if not for ever, at least for many years to come.

For, as yet, he had no knowledge of that night's tragic happenings in Helouan.

## XXV

On the Friday morning following Zanoni's visit to Lady Lucia, he returned the pearls, re-strung, the inferior ones removed; and Lucia expressed herself pleased with the result.

The Italian had given up attempting to understand the matter of the substitution. If Lady Lucia really knew nothing of his share in the work, so much the better; for it was not a transaction of which he had reason to feel proud; and he felt as though a weight were lifted from his spirit when he regarded the restrung rope of pearls.

It was not easy to part with them on that black Friday morning. He had not gone to bed at all on the preceding night, sitting alone in his little room with the beautiful, glittering things on the table before him; and more than once a wild craving to flee with them into the desert had shaken his sorely-tempted soul.

In truth, he was hardly sane on the subject, so powerful was the fascination the stones exerted over him. They seemed to him at one moment like living things, as though each shining globe contained a vital spirit, and he fancied he could hear them call him, bidding him take them into his keeping, crying to him with tiny faint voices, which besought him to admit them into the brotherhood of his own few jewels, rather than send them back to be the vain adornments of a worldly woman to whom they could never be more than a string of shimmering beads.

To him they were indeed alive; and at times he told himself he could not let them go, could not betray the trust they put in him. They grew warm and throbbing in his hand; he thought that he could feel a little pulse beating in each lustrous, moony sphere; and to send them back to be mere ornaments seemed to him a treachery. . . .

But after his breakfast of coffee and rolls on Friday morning he grew more normal. The fancies of the night receded, and he knew that he must return the pearls to their owner without delay. After all, he had known the bliss of possession for two nights and a day; and the memory of the golden hours must suffice to carry him through all the rest of his grey and unilluminated life.

He felt very old, very chilly, as he dressed himself, with his accustomed neatness, to call upon Lady Lucia. For the first time he felt that he had lived too long, that to be sixty-eight, and alone in the world, was not good for any man. Perhaps if he had married, had had children, things would have been different. By now he might have had curly-headed grandchildren playing round his feet, might have known something of the warm human companionship of friend and relative, instead of having to find his solace in a few shining stones.

Yet God and the saints had not so willed it, and until today he had never regretted his long and solitary life.

He still felt cold as he came out into the hot, brilliant sunshine; and, since it was too early for his appointment, h turned into a café and called for a little glass of *vermouth* a drink in which he indulged but rarely.

It seemed to give him a little vitality, put a little warmt into his veins; and when he had finished it he paid th reckoning and left the café with a less dragging step.

He was admitted at once to Lady Lucia's presence, an he handed her the case containing the pearls with a rathe tremulous bow.

"You have finished them?" Lucia took the case with trifle of animation in her manner. "Do they look nice Yes"—she had taken them out and was holding them agains the light—"they look very nice. Why, you have done the good, M. Zanoni! They never shone so much, looked s lustrous, before!"

"Ah, madame, pearls are very human stones," he sa quietly. "It is well known that they have their times sickness and of health like other organisms. And if th look to you specially beautiful, specially lustrous, it i perhaps, because for forty-eight hours or so they have be in the hands of one who worships them as a devotee worshi his patron saint."

Lucia glanced at him, and her blue eyes looked a litt wondering.

"You speak feelingly, M. Zanoni. Do you mean r pearls prefer your worship to my—shall I say, admiration?

"I do not know, madame." To the last his eyes we fixed on the beloved stones. "Yet, since it is you who a privileged to possess them, it is to be hoped that yo admiration will be sufficient for the gems."

"Quite so." With a careless gesture Lucia threw t rope over her head, whence it fell in shimmering lovelin over her thin white gown. "And now, M. Zanoni, we m get to business. What is your charge for the work?"

As she arranged the pearls over her corsage, Zanoni h taken a step forward, as though driven on by some inwa force; but at her last words he stopped suddenly, his fa turning a queer, mottled red, and named a price which seem to Lucia to be totally inadequate.

"I'm sure that is not enough." She had taken some co from her gold wrist bag and now stood with the money her hand. "My husband once had the pearls restrung for me in Bond Street, and I know he paid much more than that. So I shall give you what he paid if you consider it enough."

"As you will, madame," he muttered hoarsely, his eyes still fixed on the pearls. "It is no matter—whether you pay or not, it is all the same."

Lucia looked at him in real amazement. His manner was so odd, his indifference to the payment so genuine, that she was unable to understand what lay beneath his strange exterior; but she was psychologist enough to know that this peculiar behaviour was no sign of a guilty conscience. The man had not tampered with her pearls, of that she felt assured; and she was almost forced to the conclusion that it was the Italian's real reluctance to part with them which made him speak in so extraordinary a fashion.

She held out some money with an indifferent air.

"Here is your fee. And thank you very much for the excellent way in which you have carried out my wishes."

"*Mille grazie, Signora.*" He whispered the words huskily as he took the coins, and without looking at them dropped them into his pocket. "Now I will go. *Addio, Signora,* I am indeed grateful to you for allowing me to handle your pearls. . . ."

He broke off suddenly, and stumbled from the room, leaving Lucia looking after him in some perplexity.

"Quite mad, poor old fellow," she said to herself. "But at least he has returned me my pearls. And now I can wear them without that horrible feeling of tawdriness which hung round them when the others were there to spoil their value."

For five minutes or so she lingered alone, wondering, not for the first time, what was the mystery of the missing pearls. That Valerie Rivers was in some way implicated was plain enough, but how? Even Lucia could not really believe Valerie capable of successfully carrying out a fraud of that magnitude all alone; yet who had helped her, and why?

She felt convinced that Victor was ignorant of the affair. Count Rossi might conceivably know something of it; yet the whole thing was mysterious whichever way one looked at it; and the strongest reason for believing Valerie more or less guilty was to be found in Victor's readiness to marry another woman rather than let the matter be openly investigated.

For did not such readiness imply a doubt, at least, of Valerie's innocence?

Well, she had her pearls safe now; and although the loss of the five which had been mysteriously spirited away was serious in its way, at least their loss had given her something a hundred times more precious in its place—the right to make Victor Romney her husband, to have him for herself, to gratify that passionate desire which for so long had possessed her wild and ardent soul.

Suddenly she went impetuously to the door, opened it, and called Rosa Hammond, who was packing in an adjoining room.

"Have you finished, Rosa? The train goes soon after one o'clock, and I must have some lunch up here, just a few sandwiches and a glass of wine, before I start."

"Yes, Lady Lucia." Miss Hammond spoke with rather less than her usual cheerfulness. "You know, I wish you would let me go with you. It is really hardly right for you to stay alone at Helouan. I don't know how Mr. Romney will like it."

"Mr. Romney will not be asked," returned Lucia crisply. "I want a couple of days in the desert by myself. And it is really too late for me to worry about *les convenances*. So don't fuss, Rosa. And I'm not alone; I'm taking Coralie."

Miss Hammond sniffed delicately, and Lucia smiled.

"Don't be jealous, Rosa! You know you couldn't dress me as Coralie does, and even in the desert I suppose one must be tidy. I shall come back on Monday morning. I expect the hotel will close next week, so I'm just in time."

Miss Hammond's distaste for the solitary trip was in reality so strong that Lucia considered for a moment the wisdom of yielding to her companion's entreaties to the extent of allowing her to share the jaunt. But in the end she decided that she simply must be alone for two days; and when, on Saturday evening, she sat on her balcony at Helouan overlooking the desert, she told herself she had done right to keep to her first plan.

It had been an exceptionally hot day, and even now that she was dressed for dinner she said to herself that she might as well be in a Turkish bath, for in spite of her thin gown she felt nearly stifled.

She had watched the sun set in a delicate symphony of green and violet, had watched the ridged Step Pyramid of Sakhara grow misty in the distance as the approach of night veiled its outlines. Between the palm-fringed banks the Nile flowed on ceaselessly, unresting yet unhurried, "like some grave, mighty thought threading a dream": and as she watched the peaceful scene, to her own surprise Lucia felt an unwonted depression steal over her spirit.

With two infallible aids to serenity, perfect health and complete disregard of the welfare of any other human being, it was rare indeed for Lucia Holland to feel melancholy or depressed.

She was sometimes annoyed, resentful, when everything was not to her liking; angry, even, with the stupidity of those around her who failed to understand, immediately, her wishes, or were slow in carrying out her behests. But it was seldom she felt low-spirited; and as she sat staring out over the darkening desert town, she told herself that perhaps she had made a mistake in leaving the gaiety and glitter of Cairo for the solitude and silence of the desert.

It must be the heavy warmth which was affecting her nerves. She had not felt like this yesterday, had quite enjoyed her freedom; but to-night she felt strangely ill at ease, and she regretted the fact that it was really too late to set about returning to Cairo this evening.

She had promised Coralie that she might go out after dinner, to visit a Frenchwoman of her acquaintance who was maid to a lady at the Al-Hayat Sanatorium; and capricious though she was, often enough, she had not the heart to tell the girl she must cancel the engagement in order to pack the suit-cases for an immediate return to Cairo.

Besides, she would feel better, probably, after dinner; and if there were no hope of meeting a congenial spirit in the lounge afterwards, she would take a stroll in the garden and then retire to bed with the accompaniment of a French novel in which she was becoming interested.

When she went inside her room she closed the windows cautiously to exclude mosquitoes, and then, turning on the light, studied her face closely in the mirror on the dressing-table.

"I'm perfectly well—I don't look pale, not even tired." She turned away, and sitting down in a chair gave herself up to meditation. "Then what is the matter with me? I'm going to marry the man I love, I've heaps of money, I'm still very beautiful, and I needn't begin to think of growing old for ages."

As though a thought had struck her she paused for a second. Then her meditation flowed on again undisturbed.

"I'm barely thirty—I've at least ten years more before I need even look for the slightest sign of age. How I wish one didn't have to grow old! What shall I be like as an old woman, I wonder? Will my hair turn grey and my teeth fall out? And shall I lose the brightness of my eyes, the sheen of my skin? Oh, but how horrible it must be to grow old! Even though all one's friends and lovers grow old too, it's horrible! How I wish we had the secret of perpetual youth!"

The sound of a gong loud, clanging, insistent, changed the current of her thoughts, and she sprang to her feet impatiently.

"Dinner—thank heaven! I was really growing quite morbid! It's the place—I'll never come to Helouan again—not at least without some kindred spirit to drive away the blues!"

As she sat at her little table eating the excellent food provided, she began to regain her usual serene good spirits. There were not many visitors left in the hotel, the majority of those remaining being men; and as she sat dining unconcernedly Lucia was well aware of the glances cast upon her from all sides.

Not that she was unused to admiration, nor in truth did it give her the slightest satisfaction, as a rule, to be admired by strangers. With all her egoism, her colossal and superb selfishness, Lucia was not a conceited woman; and probably that was why, in spite of her beauty, she was not disliked by other women.

But to-night, after her most unwonted fit of depression, she was glad to feel that she was beautiful. The glances of the other visitors seemed to melt something in her heart which had been frozen, to drive away the bleak atmosphere of autumn and replace it by the genial warmth of summer; and by the time the meal was ended Lucia was herself once more.

After dinner she procured a wrap and went out into the garden as she had proposed doing. In spite of her new-found serenity she did not feel inclined to be sociable. She avoided, without offence, one or two women who wished to be friendly, and strolled out into the garden, which lay, quiet and not without charm, in the barrenness of approaching summer, beneath the waning moon.

The night was very still, only now and again a thin and ghostly breeze rustled the leaves of the palms and acacias which surrounded the hotel; and led by the mystery of the desert night, Lucia sauntered on through the deserted walks to the very edge of the wilderness, which here was separated from the cultivated ground by a railing only.

For some time she stood by the railing looking out over the desert sands; and although she did not know it, Victor Romney and the girl he loved were even then, led by the magic of the stars, entering upon the supreme hour of their lives. It was very still, very eerie out here all alone. From the garden behind her came queer rustlings, odd stirrings in bush or palm. She, too, heard the distant jackals bark, the frogs croak raucously; and the soft desert wind played round her even as it caressed the girl who stood, in her place, beside the man whom she had forced to acclaim himself her lover.

As she leaned over the railing a new sensation came to Lucia—whence she could not tell—a sensation of softness, of a half-sad, half-ecstatic tenderness which was quite unlike anything she had ever known before. For one fleeting moment she regretted the past, regretted the many foolish, headstrong things she had so often done. She wished, almost, that she had tried, sometimes, to be less selfish, less absorbed in self, had been kinder to those about her, to Coralie, to Rosa Hammond. She wished, too, that she had treated her husband more considerately, had taken her marriage vows more seriously; and she resolved, with a new firmness of purpose, to be a good wife to Victor Romney.

There, at least, it was not too late to amend her ways. She could not give him up—her new-born humility could not contemplate that sacrifice; but she could be to him what the woman who was his wife should be; and with a look of resolve on her face Lucia dedicated her passion afresh to nobler, more splendid uses.

In the pale starlight her face looked softer, younger, her blue eyes more gentle, more tender than usual. In truth her former depression had vanished, leaving in its place a half-shy, half-fearful contentment; and when at last a faint chill touched the warm breeze which blew around her she turned back to traverse the deserted garden on her way to the hotel with a feeling of tranquillity in her usually restless soul.

As she moved there was a rustling in a patch of shadow cast by a thick bush beside her, but Lucia, wrapped in her thoughts, did not hear it.

Nor did she see the glitter of two dark eyes which peered at her through a thin screen of leaves, the eyes of a fanatic, of a thief, of a madman, the eyes, in short, of Stefano Zanoni, who had, all unknown to her, dogged her footsteps from the moment she had left the hotel, alone, after dinner.

For it had come to this now. Zanoni had surely crossed the thin border-line which divides the world of wholesome sanity from the dark underworld of madness. Obsession had given way to mania; and for more than twenty-four hours Zanoni's reason had trembled in the balance as he thought of the beautiful shining spheres which he coveted so deeply.

Then, quite suddenly, something in the man, some last instinct of sanity, had given way; and he had known, with a dreadful self-knowledge, that he would try to take the pearls away from Lady Lucia.

What would happen he did not know, nor did he care. He only knew that he must have the pearls, no matter what dark deed led to their possession; and with the peculiarly one-sided cunning of madness, which plans so competently in one direction, and fails so utterly in another, he made out his plan of campaign.

He would go out to Helouan by train, and visit Lady Lucia's hotel by night. He knew the place, knew that many of the bedrooms had balconies, to which, surely, an active man might climb without difficulty. His first idea was to wait until midnight, and then, having previously located the Englishwoman's room, to effect an entrance, soundlessly, and take the pearls, which would probably be somewhere to hand, after which he would disappear by the way he had come.

There was a train to Cairo about one in the morning, which, if possible, he would catch, having taken the precaution to disguise himself in a thin fawn overcoat and soft hat unlike his usual sober clothing. With the collar pulled up and the hat-brim turned down he would probably escape recognition; and in his confused mind the risk of detection was very small.

But when, lurking in the grounds, he saw Lucia emerge from the hotel alone, he told himself that the opportunity would come sooner than he had expected.

By an unlucky chance Lucia was wearing her wrap loosely round her; and the pearls gleamed seductively in the starlight. Instantly in Zanoni's disordered mind caution died swiftly. Drawing back into the shadow of a great flowering bush he let her pass him, his envious eyes gloating over the pearls, his delicate fingers opening and closing themselves as though they already felt the adored jewels within his grasp.

A last instinct of prudence bade him wait a little longer, lest Lady Lucia were to be joined by any fellow-guest; and it was not until Lucia turned away from the desert to re-enter the hotel that Zanoni told himself that the moment had come.

He was in the grip of a great excitement, now that the time for action was at hand. His heart was beating quickly, his forehead was damp, his hands cold and clammy. With the short vision of the mentally unbalanced he did not look forward with any apprehension to what should come after he had done the deed. His horizon was bounded, so to speak, by a gleaming white rope; and he did not pause to wonder what would be the result of the theft.

Oddly enough, he left Lady Lucia almost entirely out of his calculations. That she would endeavour to retain her pearls was probable; but somehow the thought that she might recognise him even through his faint disguise did not enter his mind.

For the moment he was a monomaniac; and like others of his type he took no care for the future following the achievement of his present desire.

As Lady Lucia stepped into a patch of dense shade beneath a group of thick trees he was upon her. Tearing her cloak from her shoulders with one lightning movement, he jerked the rope of pearls over her head before she was aware of his intention, and a second later they were in the pocket of his loose coat.

Then, quite suddenly, he realised that she would not let them go without a fight for it. He had never thought of the danger of noise, yet even now she was calling for help, a startled cry which was choked in its birth by his hand pressing cruelly over her mouth.

Harder and harder he pressed upon her, forcing her head back while he stifled her cries; but Lucia was no coward, and although she had been taken at a disadvantage, she meant to make a fight for it.

She was a tall, well-built woman, and she struggled heroically, striving with might and main to release herself from the man's hold, to free herself sufficiently to cry aloud for help, which would surely be forthcoming from the hotel which was so tantalisingly close at hand.

She was no coward, and no fool. She had not recognised Zanoni, but she understood quite plainly that she had been robbed of her pearls, and she knew that this was a fight in deadly earnest, that unless she could release herself, could summon aid, it was probable that she would suffer serious bodily hurt.

And all the good blood in her rose to meet the situation. This was no death for a woman like her to die—to be choked to death by a thief . . . and she fought silently, with all her strength, trying to push this man away from her, to tear his encircling hands from her throat.

Zanoni, always wiry, was strong with the added strength of madness; but even he was hard put to to retain his advantage. What was one to do with a creature who writhed and struggled, who beat at him with clenched fists, a lithe, supple creature who resisted to the utmost of her powers, who, by a mighty effort, was tearing herself from his grasp, who had freed herself from his strangling hands . . . who even now was opening her swollen lips to scream for the assistance which would not surely be tardy in arriving. . . .

With a curse Zanoni clutched at her again, but she evaded his hold; and even as the first cry tore through her lips a stiletto flashed in the starlight—the cry changed to a muffled groan—and Lucia Holland sank slowly to her knees, and thence slipped, silently, to the ground.

One of the guests of the hotel standing on his balcony for a last look at the desert before turning in, said to himself that beneath the stars the world looked strange, eerie, the shadows were so dense, the light so faint and pearly. Everything was so still. Not a leaf moved on the trees, not a flower swayed in the borders.

Ten minutes ago, while undressing, he had heard an odd, muffled cry, probably from some strange night-bird of the desert; but now the silence was complete.

The whole world, surely, was at peace. And yet—in spite of the warmth of the night he shivered, standing on the balcony. For, although he did not know it there was a spirit abroad which knew no peace—the spirit of murder, whose victim lay within a stone's throw of his window. . . .

Zanoni had done his work well. One stroke from the stiletto and the thread of Lucia Holland's passionate life was severed. Death, mercifully, came quickly. She had barely time for a realisation of the great fact before unconsciousness overtook her. And her last thought was a strange one—yet not, perhaps, so strange after all in one who throughout her life had been a Pagan at heart.

And this was her thought:

*"Now I shall never be old!"*

The silence of the night closed again over the desert. The hours passed on, the moon set, and the stars paled and vanished before the light of day.

As the sun began to rise, warm and brilliant over the pallid desert sands, and the *muezzin's* nasal call rose and fell from the minaret of the mosque close by, a little bird, one of the water wagtails which haunt the banks of the Nile, hopped on to the ground beneath a group of trees, and stood, irresolute, cocking one bright eye towards the inanimate heap of black and white which lay huddled on the sand.

He did not mind human beings as a rule. He was quite used to their ways, approved indeed of their method of picnicking in the desert which led, often, to crumbs and other delicious morsels. But there was something about this strange heap which intrigued him slightly; and he hopped a few steps nearer, warily, lest the thing which appeared so oddly inert should arise, unexpectedly, and put him to ignominious flight.

When he was quite close, he stopped suddenly.

All animals, and most birds, are sensitively aware of death, in whatever shape or place it may confront them.

And although this water wagtail knew nothing of the tragedy of the night which had culminated in this great stillness, some instinct told him that this which lay before him was not merely suspended life, but something a hundred times more significant, something from which he shrank back, chilled, startled, a little afraid.

With a queer, half-strangled twitter he took to flight, flying back with outstretched wings to his home by the river, where, in strictest confidence he would describe the strange happening to his faithful mate.

And again Lucia Holland lay alone: while from the minaret of the mosque the nasal voice of the *muezzin* sounded over the awakening desert as he chanted his monotonous recital again and again:

"Allah is great . . . there is no God but Allah . . . no God but Allah . . ."

## XXVI

The news of Lady Lucia Holland's tragic death was received, at first, with incredulity. She had been so well known in Cairo society, so much had been said and written about her, about her beauty, her wealth, her pearls, and, latterly, about her engagement to Victor Romney, that when, finally, the truth was established, the shock to all classes of residents was extreme.

The circumstances of her death, too, were so horrible. It was unanimously decided that she had been murdered for the sake of her famous pearls; and there was a general consensus of opinion that it was her own well-known rashness in wearing a fortune round her neck in and out of season which had led to this deplorable tragedy.

When Victor Romney, breakfasting with Max Wynne, was called to the telephone to speak to Miss Hammond, he had, naturally, no notion of the horrible thing he was to be called upon to hear.

At first, indeed, Rosa Hammond's voice had been so agitated, her manner so upset, that he had really had difficulty in making out her meaning; but when at last, by means of repeated questioning he had heard what she had to say, he had found himself unable to grasp the terrible truth.

"Lady Lucia found dead? *Murdered?* Good God, Miss Hammond, what do you mean?"

Apparently she meant just that; and with a feeling of physical sickness Romney told her he would be with her in a few moments, and hung up the receiver before she could say anything more.

"Do you hear that, Max?" So distraught was his appearance that Wynne instinctively started from his seat. "Lucia—she's been killed—stabbed, out in the desert . . . her pearls are gone, and she has plainly been murdered by some thief for the pearls——"

"Lady Lucia murdered!" Much as he had disliked Lucia, even Wynne was horrified by the manner of her passing. "It can't be true! There must be some mistake!"

"There's no mistake, Max." Victor stared at him sombrely. "I used to think she was very unwise to wear those pearls always, but she only laughed at me and said she was quite able to take care of them."

"Well, have another cup of coffee before you go out," advised Max practically. "You'll go to the Semiramis first, I suppose. Don't bother about the shop, I'll look after everything to-day."

Ten minutes later Victor was in an *arabeah* heading wildly for the Kasr-el-Doubara. Arriving at the hotel he was shown instantly to Lucia's suite of rooms, and in a very few moments Rosa Hammond hurried to meet him, her manner a compound of relief and apprehension.

"Mr. Romney, what a terrible thing! Poor, poor Lady Lucia! When they rang me up from the hotel and told me what had happened I thought I should have fainted!"

"When did you hear, Miss Hammond?" He spoke quietly, and beneath his calm manner her own became less agitated.

"About eight o'clock. Coralie was at Helouan, you know. I only wish I had been there, but Lady Lucia would not permit me to accompany her."

"When was the—the thing discovered?"

"I don't know exactly. But it seems Lady Lucia had told Coralie she would not want her after dinner last night—the girl wished to go out somewhere, and of course, Coralie had no idea she was not in her room. And it seems she had lain out there—in the garden—all night."

"Have they any clue?"

"I don't think so—yet. But they have sent into Cairo for help—police and detectives, I suppose, and doubtless something will be discovered. I—I suppose you would not care to go to Helouan? I feel that it is my duty to go, and yet——" She broke off, looking at him rather wistfully, and he could see she dreaded the ordeal.

Oddly enough the idea of going to Helouan had not, until that moment, entered his mind; but now he saw that it was incumbent on him to do as she suggested.

"I will go, of course, I can get a train almost immediately, I believe; and I will come in on my way back to give you the latest news."

"Thank you a hundred times, Mr. Romney." She drew a sigh of relief. "I confess I shrink from the thought of going there; but I shall feel much more comfortable now that I know you are taking a hand in the affair."

As Victor turned towards the door there was a hasty knock on its panels, and a second later Count Rossi entered the room with a haste unlike his usual leisurely movements.

"Miss Hammond—*scusi!* What is this I hear—Lady Lucia dead—killed, they say, for her jewels! *Madonna mia,* tell me it is not true!"

Miss Hammond, bewildered by the sudden interruption, turned helplessly to Victor, and it was he who replied to the Italian's question.

"I'm sorry to say it is true, Count Rossi." He spoke quietly. "I'm just off to Helouan now to find out details; but I fear there has been a tragedy out there."

"I will come with you." Rossi picked up his hat, which he had flung down on entering, and turned to the door.

"Will you?" For a second Victor hesitated. But on second thoughts he considered it would be as well, perhaps, to have the Italian's company on the journey. "All right. Then we'll go at once. I've got a carriage here, and we'll make the ten-fifteen if we're quick."

A moment later the two were on their way to the Bab-el-Louk station, their Jehu using his powerful voice to such good effect that they reached the station in ample time for the train.

It was evident to Victor that the news of Lucia's death had come to his companion in the nature of an overwhelming shock. Rossi's face was grey, and his eyes seemed to have sunk in his head. Beneath the little black moustache his thin lips twitched nervously, and he was full of odd little mannerisms, flutterings of the hands, side movements of the head, which Victor had never noticed in him before.

That Rossi had admired Lucia Holland Victor knew well; but he did not know that at one time Rossi had been ready to turn aside from his pursuit of Valerie, ready to give up all his plans, his cherished desires, in order to win Lucia's friendship. He had no idea that on the night of the moonlight picnic Rossi had spoken plainly to Lady Lucia; and even had he known of the occurrence Rossi's emotion would have seemed to him almost exaggerated.

But there was something at the back of Rossi's horror at the news, of which no one but himself could have had any notion.

He could not but remember the affair of the substitution of the pearls; and it was only natural that a quick suspicion should spring up in his mind, a suspicion that perhaps Zanoni knew something of the theft of the pearls, though that the Italian could be guilty of murder seemed to Rossi to be improbable to the highest degree.

Yet when, in common with Romney, who as Lady Lucia's *fiancé* was admitted to the inner counsels of authority, he had heard the story, had seen the stiletto with which the deed had been committed, Rossi *knew* beyond shadow of doubt that it was Zanoni's hand which had struck the blow.

He did not understand how this thing could have come about, did not know of the aberration under which the Italian had been suffering; and had it not been for the clue of the stiletto he would have deemed his own certainty the fancy of a disordered brain.

But he knew the stiletto, knew the antique handle in which a single amethyst was set. For he had himself given it to the jeweller, long ago in Italy; and as he looked at it Rossi told himself that it was his duty to speak out, to tell the authorities the name of the owner of the weapon.

And yet he could not bring himself to speak, though Lucia's blood surely cried aloud to the skies for vengeance.

For it was he, indirectly, to whom Lucia Holland owed her death. Had he not shown the pearls to Zanoni, the latter would never have wished to steal them; and it was plain that theft had been the motive for the murder.

And while Count Rossi was bound to acknowledge that he had done unwisely in bringing Lucia into contact with the jeweller, some queer, obscure notion—could it be of honour?—held him back from denouncing the man who had killed the owner of the famous pearls.

He told himself that it was not for him to speak. Let the police do their own work. It was for them to find the murderer; and since no act of justice could give back to Lucia Holland the great gift of which a hasty hand had deprived her, there was no reason why he should set the law upon the right track.

The fact that he might himself be implicated did not, in truth, weigh with Rossi at this juncture. That the story of the pearls would probably be made public did not seem to him a matter of importance, so overwhelming was the one fact of Lucia's death; and there was no thought of saving his own character in his resolve to keep his knowledge of the identity of the owner of the stiletto a secret for the present.

It was remarked by more than one man among the little group of officials with whom he came in contact that Count Rossi appeared to be more upset, more *bouleversé* than the lady's English *fiancé*. In truth Victor was almost stunned by the terrible thing which had happened; and although he had never loved Lucia, had dreaded her, distrusted her, come perilously near to hating her at times, he had learned of late to believe in the sincerity of her passion for him; and the belief had engendered in him a strange, half-awed humility which, while it had little in common with the happy lover's acceptance of the beloved's adoration, yet forbade him to look upon her with quite the old distaste.

Now that she lay dead, in all the pride of her beauty, he could forget how infamously she had treated him, how she had bargained with him, how she had lied, intrigued, to win his love. He could forget her cruelty to Valerie, her injustice to himself; and could remember only the fact that she had loved him.

And since his national reserve forbade him to give even a glimpse of the thoughts in his heart to the chattering, staring groups around him, it was not to be wondered at that they thought him strangely lacking in emotion, cold, almost to the point of callousness.

He gathered that at present there was no clue to the tragedy. No one had seen or heard anything out of the common; and though the station officials had been questioned, no one remembered having noticed any suspicious characters on either of the late trains on the previous night. There had been several men returning to Cairo on both the late trains; but they were all, so the Arab station-master and porters affirmed, very respectable people, wearing very similar hats and coats; and no one had appeared unduly agitated or flurried on boarding the train.

As a matter of fact Zanoni had walked to the station quite calmly once he had left the dark garden behind him. He was fortunate, inasmuch as the train for Cairo was waiting; and he had entered it quietly, and left it again at the Bab-el-Louk station without betraying a hint of the fire which raged in his soul at the thought of the thing which he had done.

Perhaps the feel of the cold, shining pearls, as now and again he put his hand into his pocket to reassure himself as to their safety, helped to quell the fever which was rising in his veins, which was presently to overwhelm him. Be that as it may, he left the train quite quietly, and made his way home to his narrow house in the Mousky, in the street from which the Khan Khalil opens, without exciting the least attention from any of the people with whom he came in contact.

And for the moment the Nemesis who should surely overtake him stayed her hand.

For the end was not yet. Though in the nature of things it could not be long delayed.

It was late in the afternoon when Rossi and Victor Romney returned to Cairo; and in accordance with his promise Victor made his way, after parting with Rossi, to the Hotel Semiramis, where Miss Hammond was doubtless impatiently awaiting his arrival.

He found her, indeed, waiting for him with an excitement which apparently drove away all thoughts of fatigue.

"Mr. Romney, how glad I am to see you again!" Her face was alive with eagerness. "I have something to tell you—something which may, perhaps, provide a clue to the wretch who has done this thing."

"A clue?" Her manner startled him, and he stared at her uncomprehendingly.

"Yes. Coralie has said nothing to you about Lady Lucia's pearls—I mean about them being recently restrung?"

"My dear Miss Hammond, Coralie has been in hysterics the whole of the day—ever since the discovery was made. She simply cries and screams, and wrings her hands and faints, and no one can get any sense out of her. In fact, the doctor was going to give her bromide when I left, for she was absolutely out of her mind with excitement and terror."

"An excitable Frenchwoman, yes." Miss Hammond had never approved of Coralie. "Of no use whatever in an emergency. Well, it struck me this afternoon that possibly no one but Coralie and myself knew of Lady Lucia's transaction with a little Italian who called upon her this week in answer to a message she sent him."

"An Italian?" The first faint glimmering of suspicion awoke in Romney's mind.

"Yes. He was recommended by one of Lady Lucia's friends as an expert in pearls; and when Lady Lucia wanted hers restrung she sent for this man, Zanoni by name."

"He came? You saw him?"

"Yes. I saw him enter the room, that was all. But lots of people in the hotel must have seen him come."

"Quite so. He took away the pearls?"

"I believe so, yes. For when I asked Lady Lucia if she thought it safe to trust them to him she said she was not in the least uneasy about them."

"You said they were to be restrung?" He was anxious for information on the point.

"Yes. I don't know why—except that pearls do occasionally need restringing." It was evident she knew nothing of Lucia's discovery.

"He returned them in due course?"

"Yes. On Friday, just before Lady Lucia started for Helouan."

"Have you mentioned this occurrence to anyone, Miss Hammond?"

"No." For a moment she looked agitated. "I have hardly spoken to anyone since you went. The manager of the hotel has been most kind and considerate in keeping out intrusive visitors; and, of course, until your return I could do nothing."

"Well, I think it will be advisable to mention this man's name to the authorities. And if they consider the clue of importance they will doubtless follow it up." He stood hesitating for a second, and Miss Hammond's heart melted within her at the sight of his worn face.

"Mr. Romney, you're tired out." She put her hand on his arm. "I expect you've had no food to-day. Let me have something sent up for you—a few sandwiches, a glass of wine? And I'll go away—you shall sit here quite quietly and rest."

"No, thank you, Miss Hammond." He smiled at her and she could not feel offended. "It's very kind of you, but I can't eat now. I think, if you'll give me this man's address, I'll go and report what you have told me; and then I'll go home. I don't think there is much more to be done tonight."

He said good-bye, and left her.

The affair at Helouan had been considered of sufficient importance to require the presence of the Chief of Police himself; and he had returned to Cairo by the same train which conveyed Rossi and Romney; so that Victor was able to find him in person in order to tell him the story of the Italian jeweller's visit to Lady Lucia.

The Chief listened with attention; and presently called in an assistant, a youngish Frenchman who, though Romney did not know it, was a celebrated detective. To him the Chief related Romney's story, in quick, fluent French; and M. d'Avray nodded.

"Yes, we know the man, Chief, do we not? He has been a law-abiding citizen in Cairo for many years, and has a truly wonderful knowledge of precious stones, especially pearls." He paused, then added in a meditative tone: "Especially pearls."

"We have nothing against him, d'Avray?"

"Nothing. Rather we have been indebted to him on several occasions. You remember—the affair of the pearls said to have been stolen from the Winter Palace at Luxor—and there were the substituted sapphires of the well-known Countess of——"

He broke off. Victor had uttered an exclamation.

"*Pardon, m'sieu?* You spoke?"

"No. I said nothing." In his own mind he was wondering whether Zanoni knew anything of the substituted pearls on Lucia's string; but an instinct of caution forbade him to speak yet.

"Well, it might be profitable to visit this man, Zanoni." The Chief took off his eyeglasses and fitted them neatly into a case. "We have his address, I think. Somewhere off the Mousky, isn't it, d'Avray?"

"Yes—close to the Khan Khalil. He lives alone, save for a young Maltese servant. And it would certainly be well to visit him before another day dawns."

"May I come with you, sir?" Victor had a sudden desire to see the man for himself.

For a second the Chief hesitated. This visit was only semi-official, certainly, but it was not usual to allow outsiders in a business of this sort. But, after all, the murdered lady had been engaged to this young Englishman; and perhaps for once he might stretch a point.

"If you wish it, Mr. Romney, you may accompany us. But there are preliminaries to be settled—in case of arrest, though I hardly anticipate that; and one or two other matters to go into. Suppose you meet us in say, half an hour, at—let me see. The Opera Square will do. We will drive down the Mousky—it is hardly a place for you to walk in alone at night—and in the meantime, if I may advise you, Mr. Romney "—he smiled—" you will go and have a drink. You look played out."

"I want some food, that's all," said Victor, forcing a smile in return. "I've had a pretty strenuous day. But I'll meet you in half an hour, and I'm grateful to you for allowing me to go with you."

When he had gone the Chief turned to his lieutenant with a look of interrogation.

"Well, *mon cher,* what do you make of him? He does not seem as broken up as one might expect—it's mostly fatigue, I think. But he knows nothing of the murder, eh?"

"No. He knows nothing." The other spoke with conviction. "Yet something tells me this mystery will soon be cleared up. The coincidence of the visit of Zanoni with the disappearance of the pearls is almost too marked to be suspicious. Yet I think we may find a solution of the problem in the little street off the Turkish Bazaar to-night."

The house of the jeweller was in darkness when a handful of men approached it by way of the narrow street leading to the Khan Khalil. But this fact did not deter the Chief of Police from bidding one of his men ring the bell; and a few moments later a shuffling noise on the other side of the closed door betokened an approaching presence.

After a minute's fumbling with the lock the door was opened an inch or two; and a scared face peered through the chink.

"Good evening, Henry." It was d'Avray who took the initiative, for the boy was an old acquaintance of his. "Is your master at home to-night?"

For a second the face in the aperture peered out, as though the owner would fain make certain of the identity of the speaker. Then an audible gasp of relief floated through the chink; and the door was opened more widely.

"Come in, gentlemen, enter, please." The boy spoke with a queer commingling of tongues, and his face was livid as though with terror. "My master is at home, but he is sick. . . . I think the good God has sent madness into his brain. . . ."

"Madness?" A look passed swiftly between the officials. Then the Chief said rather brusquely:

"Take us to your master, boy. You need not trouble to announce us—well, what's the matter?"

He broke off suddenly, for the Maltese, having admitted them, appeared uncertain as to his next move; and stood facing them in the ill-lit passage, his enormous eyes rolling, his lips working as though in fear.

"The boy is frightened," said d'Avray quietly in French. "Let me reassure him first." Turning to the lad, he laid one hand on his shrinking arm. "If your master is ill he is in need of help. Come, then—lead us to him, that we may minister to his sickness."

With a look into the other's face the boy turned and led the way up the dingy stairs and down a malodorous passage, stopping at last before a closed door, through which came a queer, half-groaning sound which seemed to hint at a mystery behind its panels.

Putting the boy gently aside, the Chief tried the handle, which yielded to his touch; and opening the door he admitted the little group into the room where Zanoni sat alone, the pearls for which he had imperilled his soul on the table before him.

But in his eyes as he looked upon them was none of the half-blissful, half-fanatical devotion with which he had formerly dwelt upon their beauty. Instead there was in his face a great aversion, a half-bewildered repugnance, as of one who in the morning gazes upon the heap of withered leaves which at moonrise was a crock of fairy gold.

Hearing the entry of the men, he rose and turned to greet them; and the first words indicated only too plainly that his wits were wandering.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said in French, looking at d'Avray, whose appearance evidently struck a note of familiarity. "You have come to see the pearls? Alas, you are too late. The pearls are gone—spirited away while I slept—and all that remains is a handful of red beads . . . red like blood. . . ." He repeated the words dreamily. "Like blood. . . ."

There was a pause. In the man's face, bewildered as it was, in his gentle, rather absent manner, there was no hint of the callous murderer, no trace of the fury, the red lust for blood, which must have inspired the fatal blow. And yet the presence of the pearls seemed to prove that his was indeed the hand which had killed the owner of the gems.

It was M. d'Avray who spoke at last.

"Why do you call these red, *mon cher?*" He took up the pearls and weighed them in his hand. "They are beautiful pearls, of priceless sheen and lustre."

"*Non, m'sieu.*" The other spoke courteously, with a hint of weariness in his tone. "Once they were pearls—ah, but such pearls! Fit for a king's ransom . . . but now they are worthless red beads." He turned petulantly on the other men. "Do you think I do not know of what I speak? Am I not Stefano Zanoni? The greatest pearl expert in the world?"

"Quite so, M. Zanoni." The Chief took up the challenge quietly. "And that is why we wonder to hear you speak thus of the famous pearls which belonged to the Lady Lucia Holland who was *murdered*"—he stressed the words slightly—"at Helouan last night."

Zanoni listened to him with his former air of slightly fatigued courtesy; and when the Chief had finished speaking he answered him gently.

"I have heard of the Lady Lucia and her pearls, *m'sieu.* Nay, I have handled them—for was it not last night that I restrung them—taking off the false ones which my compatriot, the Count Rossi, had bidden me substitute for others——" He stopped, for Romney had uttered an exclamation. But as no one spoke he went on again after a second's pause. "I think it was last night—or perhaps ——" he broke off again, and passed his delicate hand over his brow. "I cannot remember, *messieurs.* But these are not the pearls. Oh, no. Once I thought they were—but when I looked at them they were only red pebbles——"

Again he paused; and again the group of men kept silence. And in the silence a thought struck him; and moving to where a tall cabinet stood against the wall, he opened a drawer and took therefrom a small leather box.

'See, *m'sieu.*" By chance he spoke to Romney. "In [illegible] are the pearls I took from the lady's necklace—five there are, though M. le Comte swore there should be six."

He was opening the box as he spoke; and now he shook the beautiful pearls into his open palm and held them out for Victor's inspection. "Look, *m'sieu*—are they not exquisite in their sheen——"

Suddenly a devastating change came over his face, and he trembled from head to foot. Still holding out the pearls, he stared at them in a horrible silence, while his lips twitched, and his eyes started with terror.

"No, no, they are not pearls . . . they too are red . . . red as blood. . . . God in heaven, they are drops of blood. . . ."

With a strangled cry he flung the pearls from him so that they fell and rolled over the dingy carpet; and then, while those who had come to question him stood silent and awed around him, he dropped in a limp heap on to a chair and buried his twitching face in his hands.

Instinctively the other men glanced at the Chief of Police; and his eyes were sombre as he responded to their glances.

"I think there is no doubt that this is our man," he said gravely. "But I think also that the judgment of heaven has already fallen upon him. You know the Arab saying, 'Whom Allah will destroy He first drives mad.' And I think this is no mere temporary hallucination."

"Are we to take him, Chief?"

"I suppose so—yes. But be gentle with him—don't use undue force. He is an old man, and God only knows what drove him to the deed, if it was indeed his hand which struck the blow."

Bending over the huddled figure, d'Avray began to speak with gentle insistence; but at the same moment there was a slight commotion behind his back; and turning, he found a new figure in the room, the figure of Count Rossi, who had pushed open the door and had entered without, apparently, realising that others were there before him.

And as he stood, just within the doorway, his face a little paler, his dress a little more carelessly arranged than usual, to the eyes of Victor Romney, at least, he had a curiously suspicious, almost furtive air quite unlike the serene self-confidence common to him.

It was evident that he was disconcerted to find so many people already here; and for a moment he paused, uncertainly, his black eyes roving hither and thither with an air of anxiety in their density which did not escape the notice of one of the men who watched him.

Then, having made up his mind as to his course of action, he stepped forward and bowed ceremoniously to the Chief of Police.

"Good evening, *Signore.*" He spoke calmly. "I do not intrude? I wished for a word with Signore Zanoni, concerning a small commission I desired him to execute for me."

"Good evening, Count." The Chief's manner was noncommittal. "I fear Zanoni will be unable to undertake any commissions at present. To begin with, he is not well; and in the second place it will be necessary for him to leave here for some little time."

"But——" Rossi was still glancing about him; and now his eyes had fallen on the rope of pearls which still lay on the tablecloth. He moved forward, with an expression of admirably simulated surprise. "Surely—these are the pearls of which we have heard so much to-day?"

"Yes." D'Avray answered him rather drily. "These are the pearls, and I am sure, Count Rossi, that your intelligence will supply you with the link between their presence here and M. Zanoni's enforced retirement from the scene for a short time at least."

"You don't mean——" Rossi's horrified expression was a masterpiece. "You can't mean you suspect him—Zanoni—of murdering Lady Lucia? Oh, no, that's absurd, impossible!"

"I trust it may be so." The other's voice was rather grim. "But I fear I must ask you to postpone your business for the present. And now, as the hour grows late, it will be well to remove M. Zanoni for the night."

One of the men approached, holding out the pearls which he had picked up from the carpet.

"Do we take the pearls, sir? And the other jewels?"

"The pearls, yes. Nothing else. But as there are valuable things here, you, Roden, had better remain in charge. And now to business."

He approached Zanoni's bowed figure; and putting a hand on his shoulder, spoke not unkindly.

"Come, *Signore*, it is late, and I must ask you to accompany me for the night. You do not require explanations, eh? You will come quietly?"

The little Italian rose to his feet, and looked about him uncomprehendingly.

"You wish my presence, *Signore? Si, si,* I will come with you. But I fear I am not fit to appear in grand company. Their Majesties will excuse?"

"Yes." The Chief was watching him closely. "You need not trouble about that. Is there anything you wish to do, to arrange before we leave here?"

The Italian looked round the narrow room and shook his head.

"No, *Signore.* There is nothing. Once I had a treasure indeed—a string of pearls fit for an angel's rosary—but in the night they were stolen from me and a handful of red berries put in their place. But a follower of Garibaldi, to be sure, needs no jewels. My father has told me so, often. A red shirt, a sword . . . and I am glad there is yet fighting to be done."

Behind him d'Avray touched his forehead significantly; and the Chief nodded. It was evident that for the present at least the man's wits were wandering; and there was nothing to be gained by further inquiry.

As Zanoni moved to the door, one of the men directing him gently with a hand on his arm, he passed Rossi; and instantly the latter spoke to him, in a low tone, and rapidly, in Italian. But, although Zanoni heard he did not, apparently, comprehend what was said; and he gazed at Rossi, as though wondering, blankly, who this compatriot of his might be. A moment later Zanoni had gone; and the Chief turned to Victor, who had stood motionless ever since Rossi's entrance.

"We have your address, I think?" He spoke pleasantly. "And this gentleman—Count Rossi, is it not? May we have your address also? Since Zanoni is known to you we may perhaps call upon you for a little information."

Rossi thought quickly—his brain was always swift to work in an emergency; and he replied without apparent hesitation, giving the address of his villa.

"I have known the man many years," he added smoothly. "He has done work for me, both in Cairo and Rome. The latest bit of business I put in his way was connected with Lady Lucia Holland, who wished to sell a few of the pearls off her string; and knowing him to be an expert I recommended that he should be invited to replace the stones with others. But I deeply regret the fact, if by so doing, I have indirectly led to the unfortunate lady's death."

Although Victor Romney knew he lied, he could not but admire the man's nerve; and it was evident that the Chief of Police was favourably impressed by this frankness.

He bowed amiably to them both, and expressed his regret that they should have been brought into contact with the affair; and then excused himself on the plea of business and hurried after the rest of the men, leaving Rossi and Victor alone, save for the presence of the man who was left in charge of the place.

For a moment neither spoke; though Rossi opened his cigar case deliberately and extracted therefrom a thin black cigar. Then Romney said quietly:

"I should like a word with you, Count Rossi. May I ask you to return home with me for the purpose?"

For a second Rossi's black eyes studied his face insolently. Having finished his scrutiny he replied with an air of indifference:

"As you wish, Mr. Romney. I have an *arabeah* outside, and I will accompany you to your flat for a few moments if you will. But it is late, and I must not trespass long on your hospitality."

"Quite so." Romney spoke dryly; and in silence the two men left the house, entered the waiting victoria, and were whirled through the deserted Mousky into the more civilised portions of the city.

No words were exchanged during the journey; and not until they were facing each other in the sitting-room of the flat which Victor shared with Max Wynne was the battle joined.

Then Romney spoke plainly.

"Count Rossi, half an hour ago you lied, in my presence, concerning Lady Lucia's rope of pearls. You asserted that the lady was cognisant of the substitution of certain of her pearls. Had, in fact, authorised the substitution. But you lied, for she did not know of it; and thanks to your cleverness when she discovered the fact her suspicions were directed to the wrong quarter."

"You mean——"

"I mean that Lady Lucia believed Miss Rivers to have had some knowledge of the theft. And although it was you alone who were responsible, you made no sign that you knew of it."

"So her ladyship suspected Valerie." His tone was meditative. "I guessed as much, though I confess I was considerably intrigued when I learned that Lady Lucia herself had afterwards contradicted the idea of the substitution. But I thought I had solved even that mystery when Lady Lucia's engagement to you was announced."

"Just so." Romney judged it time to be done with pretence. "As you have doubtless guessed, alſo, Lady Lucia agreed, on conditions, to keep the matter quiet. But now that she is no longer here to be troubled with the affair, there is no need for further silence, on my part."

"What do you mean, Mr. Romney?" For once Count Rossi spoke hurriedly. "You don't mean you will make the matter public—drag the affair into the light of day? Far better to let it rest——"

"Public, no." Romney looked straight at his adversary. "But Miss Rivers, and her uncle, must know the truth."

"Her uncle?" Rossi was plainly taken aback. "But—there is no need——"

"Sir Eric must know the truth," repeated Romney inflexibly. "If he is to give his young niece to you in marriage he shall, at least, know the character of the man to whom he entrusts her."

"So!" Rossi drew a sibilant breath. "I understand. Now that you have lost one wealthy bride you seek another. Miss Rivers' fortune—what is it?—a mere bagatelle, a paltry forty thousand or so, compared to Lady Lucia's riches! But I suppose it will suffice! I see your plan, Mr. Romney. I am to be dismissed that you may step into my place. But I have a hold over Miss Rivers; and I do not think you will find it so easy to displace me."

He paused. Romney was staring at him in such undisguised amazement that the flow of his volubility was checked.

"Miss Rivers' fortune? Forty thousand pounds?" Romney's voice was startled. "Ah—I see the reason for your persecution of the girl at last! Whether your information is correct I can't say—probably it is, since I know you to be a cautious person. But if Miss Rivers has money, there's all the more reason why Sir Eric should know the truth. And I shall see him to-morrow morning and tell him what I have learned to-night."

"You will, eh?" For a second Rossi looked at him as a beaten man looks at a hated conqueror. Then his indomitable effrontery came to his aid; and he carried off the defeat he could not minimise, with a satirical laugh. "*Bene, Signore!* Go, then, to your work. And if it be proved that you, instead of me, are to be the favoured suitor, remember that it is I, Paolo Rossi, who have taught *la petite* the meaning—and the method—of love-making!"

So indescribably vile was the manner of the innuendo, so palpably foul the sneer, that for a moment Romney saw red. He experienced an almost overpowering longing to fall upon the liar and slay him, to force the lie down his throat, to batter his head against the wall; and possibly Rossi saw something of his desire in his face; for, with a hurried movement the Italian opened the door beside which he stood, and before Romney could translate desire into passionate action Rossi had quitted the flat, and was running down the stone staircase with the frantic haste of a man who, for one horrible moment, has looked death in the face.

"So! It is finished," he said to himself in Italian as he ran. "The fool will go to Sir Eric with the tale. Even Zanoni may be a danger, though for the present he is harmless enough. I must resign the hand of the little Valerie, it seems, and her nice little English fortune as well. But I do not think Sir Eric will care to make the matter public. And since Lucia is dead—God rest her soul!"—he crossed himself devoutly—"the story of the pearls will soon be forgotten!"

For a moment an expression of genuine remorse crossed his face.

"I wish, now, that I had not called Zanoni to my aid. If I had not done so, *la bella donna* would be alive. And to have deprived the world of so lovely a thing is a crime indeed. Ah, Lady Lucia, you would have done better to accept my love after all!"

He resumed his walk through the quiet starlit night; and for once his usual self-sufficiency of bearing had deserted him altogether.

## XXVII

### PART OF A LETTER FROM VICTOR ROMNEY TO MAX WYNNE

"*Carbis Bay,*
"*Cornwall,*
"*August 14th*, 19—.

". . . and I am to see Valerie to-morrow. As you know, Sir Eric wouldn't let me see her again before leaving Cairo. He said, rightly, I suppose, that she had already gone through too much; and the shock of Lucia's death on the top of everything else was the last straw.

"But when once the affair with Rossi was broken off—and Sir Eric was horrified to hear about the pearls Rossi had stolen from Lucia's string—I felt that I could wait patiently—even for three months, which was the time fixed by Sir Eric. As you know, I had no idea Valerie had any money of her own, until Rossi let it out; and by the way, it was a fresh blow to Sir Eric to discover that Rossi had known of it all along, in spite of his pretended disinterestedness. But it makes it a bit hard for me to ask Valerie to marry me, even although I have a little money of my own; and I shall have to be guided by Sir Eric's attitude in the matter before I venture to ask her

"At any rate I can't say when—if ever—I shall be allowed to marry her; and that's why I can't reply, definitely, to your question as to my future part in the Carpet Bazaar. Even if Valerie does marry me, it may not be for a year or two—she's very young yet; and in that case I'll come back to Cairo to join you with pleasure. But I don't think Sir Eric will let Valerie return to Egypt, not, at least, for some years; and in that case——

"You would hear the end of poor old Zanoni? His wits never came back to him; and within two or three weeks of the affair he had a seizure of some kind and died almost immediately. What a lot those pearls of Lucia's have to answer for!

"As to Lucia herself—one hardly knows what to say, or even to think, about her. It is one of the great tragedies of our generation; and I think it will be many years before anything so perfectly beautiful dawns upon the world again. Even now I catch my breath, thinking of her loveliness; and the thought that she loved me, in her way, fills me, at times, with a great humility.

"And yet—Valerie's prettiness, Valerie's sweetness, Valerie's youth mean a hundred times more to me.

"How I have endured these three months of probation I hardly know. The weather is perfect, Cornwall, as always, a satisfaction, its coast is so magnificent, its sea so splendid. If it weren't for the sea I'd be lonely here, all by myself. But I swim for hours; and when I'm not swimming I lie on the cliffs and watch the sheet of sapphire spread out beneath me, and see the ships passing here and there on their way to all the great countries of the world.

"I wish, often, that you were with me. But you, I suppose, are tucked away in some beauty spot in Persia—is it ever cool there, by the way?—and I wouldn't drag you away to cheer my solitude, even if I could.

"After all, the world's a glorious place.

"And I shall see Valerie to-morrow. . . .

"Yours,

"VICTOR."

THE END

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